10. This Time of Fires

We have been labouring to think what community, what being-together, looks and feels like, whether unfinished, attentive relationships conjure the conditions for political possibilities: where no one has to administer each other, where no one has to belong, where no one gets asked for their papers.

To be attentive to one another is to resist the work of the teleological, to be present and exposed in the everyday. That means being exposed to all of it, to all the unfamiliarities and incommensurableness and unfinishedness of being-together with people. And if we are working to extend friendship to the more-than-human, that means being exposed to all of it, to animals, insects, rivers, trees, fires and floods.

We are as fond of cute animal videos and spectacular sunsets as the next urbanite, but the more-than-human world is turbulent and unpredictable and very often violent and stomach-churning. It's comfortable enough to be exposed or attentive to an animal or mountain hike, but in search of a sensibility, a mode of friendship, we went in search of wildfires.

Fires are a regular feature of summers in the Pacific Northwest, but they have been accelerating in size and impact with global warming. We were curious about what being in close proximity to wildfires might do to our thinking, what it might disturb. We had written about fires in our previous book so we knew something of what we were heading for, but mostly went in blind this time, trying to learn how to be attentive.

We drove north from Vancouver (xʷməθkʷəyəm, səlilwəta and Skwxwú7mesh territories) up the Sea-to-Sky Highway, but as we drove,

we were constantly reminded that we were passing through a wet, temperate rainforest. All of it, at least until St'at'imc territory, is saturated with water: pouring out of the skies through mist and fog, crashing down the steep slopes of the Coast Mountains through a dense forest of giant red cedars and Douglas firs dripping with mosses and ferns, cascading over, under and through the highway out into the Howe Sound fjord (Atl'ka7tsem).

Everything is wet out here: ocean on one side, rainforest on the other, and on most autumn days, rain pours out of the skies, streaming down through the mist and fog. On a typical British Columbia fall day your truck barrels from one pond-sized puddle after another, and with so much water on the left, the right and above, the main goal is usually to get inside and get dry. This wet corner of the Pacific Northwest coast feels like about the last place that's ever going to burn.

That warm November day though, the Sea-to-Sky Highway was sparkling in all its spectacular photographic-grade scenery. The sun was bouncing off the white-capped waves out in the Sound, the mountains were glowing with delicate frostings of snow and we were thinking about fire. It seemed impossible that this could burn, but all that summer, choked with smoke, trapped under a heat dome and crowded with pandemic paranoias, the threats of fire and heat never felt more real.

Up and down the west coast, from California to northern B.C., everything seemed to be burning that season. And it wasn't just here – unprecedented wildfires rampaged across Ontario and Siberia and Greece and Turkey and Brazil – flaming hellscapes searing images of climate catastrophes, creeping to the edges of major cities, often just barely or not-at-all controlled.

That heat-dome of 2021 sits in our memories like a smothering, sweaty fever-dream. We watched a homeless man literally fry an egg on a sidewalk. We repeatedly called 911, multiple times a day, for people felled by the heat, only to get put on hold. Emergency phone operators were overwhelmed – it often took 40 minutes just to get someone on the line, and then ambulances were triaging, telling people to do the best they could but 595 people in B.C. died directly from the heat. The streets

were quiet, deserted of everyone who had anywhere cool to escape to. Even the birds were silent, all of us just trying to get through it.

Near the end of that hellish week, right in the maw of the heat, Lytton (Nlaka'pamux territory) found itself the object of international attention. A village of 250 or so people a few hours northeast of Vancouver, Lytton has always had hot summers, but trapped under the dome it was breaking historic marks. Global media breathlessly indexed its daily record-breaking: 115.9 degrees Fahrenheit on the 27th, 118.2 on the 28th, 121.3 on the 29th (that is 46.6, 47.9 and 49.6 degrees celsius). Three days in a row of the highest temperatures ever in Canada! Kind of unbelievably it got hotter here than it had *ever* been recorded in Las Vegas!

It was macabre, punishing entertainment: scorekeeping global heating in real-time. And then it went from gawking to horrified in a hot minute: a fire, sparked perhaps by a passing train, turbo-charged by the heat dome that had turned the entire town of Lytton to tinder. It started somewhere on the south end of town, and within 20 minutes flames had engulfed almost everything: homes, businesses, civic buildings. Everything was soon cinders. More than 1,000 people from the larger area had to flee with almost no notice. There was no evacuation, just a mad scramble to escape: north, south, east, anywhere to get out.

We had seen something like this before. In 2016 the two of us were writing a book about global warming and the tar sands of northern Alberta. We were in Ft. McMurray two months after the wildfires that caused 60,000 people to flee town. Without the wild heroism of firefighters and residents that whole city would have burned to the ground. Remarkably that town was substantively preserved, but witnessing the aftermath was still pretty startling.

We arrived in Ft. Mac a few weeks after the danger had passed and were shocked – not so much by the devastation, which we were mostly prepared for – but more by the asymmetries, the capriciousness, the speed, the bewildering patterns. We had kind of presumed that wildfires move like an ocean – a tide coming in steadily and then being beaten back – but it wasn't like that at all. Even after a ton of research and staring at maps with civic officials it was still confounding: the Ft. Mac fires were (at least to our eyes) so unpredictable – one house burned to

bone-white remnants with the houses on either side untouched, one neighbourhood destroyed, the next one over entirely preserved: the fact that only two people died (while driving out) in those fires seems unimaginable, unduplicable.

The Lytton fire felt like the climate emergency finally landing in our own front yard, like waking to see nightmares come true: a world of heat and fires and accelerating losses, a slow-building anxiety attack now immediate and corporeal.

Most of us believe the decades-old science behind global warming to be true. Most of us understand and accept that anthropogenic climate change is a profound threat that must be met head-on and with urgency. But there is such a weird atemporality to global warming – demands to change right now for a world to come, a place and time far beyond our daily cadences, catastrophes possibly decades and continents away. What do numbers like 1.5 degrees or 425 ppm or 57 Gt/year mean when all you want to do is fly to some beach somewhere?

This damp place perched on the edge of the continent has always felt insulated from so much of the world: Far from major cities, British Columbia boasts a pleasantly moderate climate, robustly saturated with national delusions about Canadian virtues, ecological and otherwise. It has always felt like global warming was something that would hit somewhere else, somewhere far away, sometime after we're gone, something that doesn't involve us directly, yet.

Sometimes it feels like fundamental ecological transformation is within reach, other times it feels like we're stuck in a kind of frozen time where catastrophes are inevitable.

Some of us are doing vastly more than others to contribute to global warming. The colonial Canadian state remains aggressively wedded to oil-and-gas expansionism especially on Indigenous territories. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has bailed out pipeline infrastructure and continues to claim that vast development of extractionism is the only route to a green future: "We must also continue to generate wealth from our abundant natural resources to fund this transition to a low-carbon economy."

This is precisely the contradiction so many of us find ourselves in. Grasping for a believably ecological future while hallucinating that we can get there with little pain. Does everything have to go up in flames first?

That's why we were headed for Lillooet (Tsilhqot'in, Statimc and Dënéndeh territories), Lytton (Nlaka'pamux territory), Merritt (Syilx and Nlaka'pamux territories), Penticton (Syilx territory) and some of the most fire-ravaged parts of the province. We were looking for something new, something to dislodge stuck notions, a future not on fire.

The journey from Vancouver to Lytton is spectacularly bifurcated. After the first couple hours of dense coastal rainforest, you get to Lil'Wat and turn onto the Duffey Lake Road, which heads straight up, switchbacking over and through the mountains and then boom! everything changes in an instant. You cross into an entirely different ecosystem. One minute you're on the cool, wet coast, the next you are in the hot, high, dry, semi-arid farm and ranch country of the B.C. interior.

We spent the night in Lillooet and then headed down to Lytton, about an hour southeast, the same place we had hiked with our beloved dog-friend. We were bracing ourselves, and it was exactly as we feared. The main strip of town is only about a half-mile long and remained open to traffic, but the road was straddled by high fencing blocking off all the side streets. Huge signs at each end of town implored you to keep your windows up due to the severe toxicity in the air, water and soil; stopping was prohibited. Security guards were posted at both ends of the strip to prevent gawking, so we had to make a half-dozen runs back and forth, crawling along and maybe occasionally getting out to look more closely and take photos. No one hassled us, but it did feel awkward and insensitive, staring at the remnants of a burned village.

One of our most glaring initial observations was that it was not a forest fire. It really just burned the town down. The fire razed the village in twenty minutes. But it did not jump the Thompson nor the Fraser River, which border the town to the west and north, and by the looks of it, the flames barely crossed the highway to the east. Residents blame the train. Lytton is a train town and the tracks run right through. A spark might have set the whole thing off. Videos posted on social media showed

a train smoking as it went through Boston Bar, two hours south, that same day. The Transportation Safety Board conducted an investigation and then issued a statement assuring the public that it was not trains that sparked the fire.

Gordon Murray, a Lytton resident whose intense footage of the fire and his escape was splashed across international media, told us he could hear helicopters dropping water right in town. He said nearly half the residents didn't have insurance, himself included. He argued that if the town is to be rebuilt, it needs to have a different vision that brings together Indigenous and settler communities in a better way than existed before – one that, from a design and planning perspective, accounts for the reality of more climate-related disasters to come in the near future.

There is a bewildering array of competing interests at play even in a tiny village. Many folks wanted to move back in as quickly as possible – they were tired of shacking up in motels and spare rooms far from home, wondering who was going to pay for what. Some people were back rebuilding almost immediately, hoping that concrete houses will survive the next time around. The town council formally partnered with the Lytton First Nation to develop a fire-resistant recovery plan, but there are five Indigenous communities in the immediate area, many of whom propose alternative plans. Officials with the provincial preparedness program FireSmart urged patience and new "fire-ready" practices like "vegetation management," landscaping "only with fire-resistant species of trees, shrubs, plants and grasses," isolating firewood and propane far away from buildings, building comprehensive community evacuation plans and installing emergency speakers on trees and poles.

Surely residents should be at the heart of the decision-making; Lytton is a deeply meaningful place for so many people near and far. Maybe the fire is an opportunity to dramatically rethink the community. The town has been a colonial settlement since the 19th-century gold rush, built on traditional Indigenous territory. There are relationships between communities both human and other-than that could be explored in a meaningful way, to mend some of the wounds and missteps of the past and present, to prepare for a future very different from the way we

live now. Does anyone think that heat dome was an anomaly that will never repeat itself?

We spoke to a number of senior firefighting professionals, and every one was open and frank about how dramatically the fires and floods continue to grow more destructive across B.C. New patterns of fire behavior throw into disarray all conventional response methods. Hotter, dryer summers scramble the ability to prepare. Fires that used to take three or four weeks to develop now explode suddenly and ferociously. It's obvious that where fire-fighting was once mostly a summer activity now has to be a year-round project.

There is a consensus emerging across North America among progressive fire officials, ecologists and conservation groups that a century of aggressive fire suppression has created a "fire paradox." As firefighting practices and resources grow in sophistication and effectiveness, the vast majority of fires are extinguished very quickly – but this leaves huge amounts of unburned land and flammable material left behind. This constantly accumulating stockpile presents a huge danger: When a fire does get out of control, it has vast amounts of organic material waiting, already primed and dried by the heat of global warming. This creates disastrous conditions for big fires to become catastrophic fires. The paradox is that there are now way too many fires and not nearly enough fires.

This is of course something that Indigenous people across the continent have been saying forever: that 'good fires' are incredibly important for ecological integrity and occasional burns are an essential part of the ecosystem. Forest fires burn clean and allow for regenerations. Indigenous nations all across British Columbia, all through the regions that have burned out of control in recent years, have always practised 'cultural burns' to protect their lands and communities.

We spent that night at our pals' Jeff and Sabine's cabin up the Nahatlatch River, arguing late about whether humans can be friends with animals, or a tree, or the river: "If friends are supposed to be always there for you, I feel like that tree has been here for me, shading this cabin, for more than forty years now. It feels like a friend" Jeff said that night. We wondered if the tree could or would possibly reciprocate.

The next day we drove over to Penticton (Syilx/Okanagan Nation Alliance Territory including the Sn/Pink/tn), four and a half hours east. That day and the next we criss-crossed through the South Okanagan region, past wildfires that were still burning, had recently been extinguished or had caused major disruptions and evacuations through the summer. The Okanagan is the hot, dry south-central area of British Columbia, famed for lakefront hoatels, fruit-growing, pocket deserts, often-punishing heat and, in recent years, relentless wildfires.

As we drove over and through the Okanagan past many major fire sites, it all still felt wildly flammable, even deep into autumn. Essentially all the major fires were extinguished or under control, but it was still so parched. It is a profoundly different ecosystem from the coast, all tumbleweeds and gnarled ponderosa pines, now riddled with orchards and wineries and garish gated retirement developments. It reminds many people of the Mediterranean – Lebanese, Turks, southern Italians and Croatians often say it feels like home. We drove up to the site of the most damaging wildfire in B.C. history – the 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park Fire, which forced out 33,000 residents – and wondered how the hell another fire up here could ever be controlled.

It is now orthodox analysis that the whole South Okanagan is threatened by fire year after year due to unecological forest practices and fire management.

Prominent Indigenous voices here have long clamored that if the province had listened to them – had adopted, understood or even recognized long-standing Indigenous fire prevention strategies – these wildfires would be manageable and far less fearsome. "Forests have been mismanaged for over 100 years," elected Member of the Legislative Assembly of BC Joan Phillip, told us. "Cultural fires need to be part of the solution."

That summer underlined just how intensely the domination of humans and the domination of the other-than-human world are entwined. Coloniality violently suppresses not just human bodies and subjectivities, but knowledges, ways of being. In the same breath, it both builds ferocious dysfunctions and forecloses possible routes out.

Does friendship offer any break in these clouds, is it a disposition that can surpass domination, gesture at another anti-colonial way of being in the world? We have been labouring hard to think past borders, but also to let our thinking remain unfinished, incomplete. A cultural burn might not feel all that friendly to a tree, but it might well to the forest as a whole. Could we ever be friends with the more-than-human world?