Unsettling Fire: Recognizing Narrative Compassion

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ABSTRACT: Through close analysis of first-hand narratives of modern wildfire from residents in underrepresented rural communities in the American West, framed with cutting edge research in affect studies and narrative theory, we argue for an expansion of a theory of narrative empathy to make legible an alternate emotional response to texts: *narrative compassion,* in which narrative interpreters feel "toward" instead of "with" characters and/or narrators. We assess the capacity for narrative compassion to function as both a feeling toward and a standing with others, which maintains agency and lines of difference while still fostering prosocial relationships. We argue for the urgency of this expansion, given that many personal experience narratives about the environmental crisis in which we write, like narratives of modern wildfire, feature a high degree of evaluation as narrators attempt to make sense of confusing and unsettling experiences of a rapidly changing world. As such, these narratives tend to resist the emotional "twinning" upon which empathy relies and demand alternative modes of emotional engagement between narrators and interpreters.

KEYWORDS: *empathy, compassion, personal experience narrative, wildfire, climate change*

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IN A RECENT ARTICLE in *The Guardian,* Danial Immerwahr describes the "deranged pyroscape" we now inhabit, a world in which wildfires are "taking on new shapes, visiting new places, and consuming new fuels" in ways that are deeply unsettling. Across the American West, Australia's south, Europe, south-east Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, smoke seasons are growing longer and more intense, and fires are increasingly devastating, wiping out entire towns in minutes, and threatening even the most fire-resistant species, such as giant sequoias. Immerwahr states that these fires are "as confounding as they are unsettling, and our instincts are poor guides." This characterization of nature-gone-mad closely echoes the recent transition toward what fire historian Stephen J. Pyne has called the "unhinged pyrogeography" of a possible new geologic epoch, the Pyrocene. According to Pyne, the Pyrocene "proposes a fire-centric perspective on how humans continue to shape the Earth," and "renames and redefines the Anthropocene according to humanity's primary ecological signature, which is our ability to manipulate fire" (*The Pyrocene* 3–4). As such, it foregrounds a new narrative—"the long alliance between fire and humans"—that offers us a "sideways" view on anthropogenic climate change and the environmental crisis of our moment (4).

Whether deranged or unhinged, what we are living through today is not a novel ontological state of nature but the social and ecological blowback from a century long crusade to unseat wildfire's keystone role as an agent of forest ecology. Today's fires are simply responding, albeit frighteningly, to the favorable conditions and fuels found on Anthropocene landscapes. As repeated tragic encounters with this evolving pyroscape show, large-scale suppression efforts—especially the U.S. National Forest Service's "10 a.m. policy" throughout much of the twentieth century—have become infeasible in part because of the complicating factor of climate change. While twenty-first-century management has recognized the important ecological role of fire, wildfire losses continue to rise despite increased spending on wildfire suppression due to the rapid expansion of the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) (Radeloff et al.). We are the deranged or unhinged ones for believing in forests without fire—for insisting and working to make such a dream reality.

But if not themselves deranged, Anthropocene fire regimes pose a challenge to human senses and sensemaking systems. Not only are these fires difficult to apprehend, but public awareness and acceptance of fire's ecological role in regulating and shaping forest ecosystems are still recovering after seventy-five years of Smokey Bear and the Forest Service's Wildfire Prevention Campaign. Now suddenly back on the

landscape, the behavior of fire can strike us as violent, disruptive, tragic, unexpected, or even strange and eerie. In the context of human experience, the extraordinary or extreme kinetic behavior of wildland fire, moving as it does across familiar landscapes in ways and at speeds that defy expectation and possibility, often frustrates our ability to communicate with each other about today's fires. As William Cronon states in a foreword to Pyne's *Fire: A Brief History,* fire is such a "big story" (xi) as to be almost incomprehensible to humans; readers can be "forgiven for occasionally losing their bearings" when thinking about fire as the "subject is so demanding, and so unfamiliar to most of us" (xii). Pyne, too, notes that today's wildfires resist a clear story. He writes that the future of fire seems "so dire" that some observers argue that we are "headed into a no-narrative" tomorrow: "So immense and unimaginable are the coming upheavals," he writes, that "there is no precedent for what we are about to experience, no means by which to triangulate from accumulated human wisdom into a future unlike anything we have known before" (*The Pyrocene* 5). He circumnavigates this upheaval via a master narrative of the evolution of fire on Earth from natural to anthropogenic and then to industrial: "Where once there was one kind of fire on Earth, then two, now there are three. That's the narrative" (6).

Yet fire remains narratively challenging on the micro-level—in the narration of the personal experience of *what it's like* to experience fire—that Pyne's master narrative does not illuminate. Environmental humanities scholars of climate change fiction, or cli-fi, are engaged in an energetic debate about the ability of narrative to represent anthropogenic climate crisis. Bill McKibben, in his introduction to an early cli-fi short story collection, perceptively argues that narratives that take seriously anthropogenic climate change require "a real departure from most literary work" as they must take on a fundamentally different shape than traditional stories (3)."Instead of being consumed with the relationship between people," he writes, such narratives must "take on the relationship between people and everything else" (3–4). This shift in interest has clear ramifications for traditional understandings of character, setting, and action: "On a stable planet, nature provided a background against which the human drama took place; on the unstable planet that we're creating, *the background becomes the highest drama*" (4; emphasis original). Pyne suggests that fire poses a similar problem, in that fire is a "notorious shape-shifter that integrates everything around it" (*The Pyrocene* 119) and "a catalyst [that] takes on the character of its context, it synthesizes its surroundings" (*Fire* xvi). Using this logic, we might understand fire as an agential and oxymoronic background drama: it is a phenomenon that pays no attention to divisions between dynamic characters and discreet settings.

We take a different approach to wildfire and narrative. Drawing from cognitive and linguistic analyses of storytelling, we understand narrative to be a primary tool by which humans make sense of their world and their place in it. We are especially indebted to William Labov's work on personal experience narrative and his argument that oral stories are a means of "recapitulating past experience" (Labov and Waletzky 20), in which the speaker "becomes deeply involved in rehearsing or even reliving events" (Labov, *Language* 354). We thus understand the process of telling *about* first-hand experiences of wildfire to be a rich mechanism of making sense of that experience, even if that process expresses wonder or bewilderment at the way

that these fires are different from other phenomena that we know. First-hand stories of fire, we argue, are rich repositories for new knowledge about modern wildfire. They are also rich repositories for understanding the potential emotional work that these narratives can do.

We spent two years collecting first-hand oral testimonies of wildfire "frontliners" from underrepresented rural communities in Idaho and Eastern Washington state: ranchers, farmers, and civilians who encountered wildfire in their home communities. The context of the telling of these narratives was strategically casual. Guided by a semi-structured interview guide and working via Zoom or telephone because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews reflect in-the-moment, off-the-cuff recollections of wildfire and attempts to explain what it was like to have this experience. These stories are often striking, both for how they dwell on the incomprehensibility of wildfire and for how they articulate and invite affective connections across various divides, including those of ideology, geography, and species. While fire professionals tend to rely on a specialist (and highly metaphorical) vocabulary to discuss their work—wildfire can "jump" rivers, smolder underground as "zombie" for weeks to months along root systems, "fly" or "spot" as gusting embers across valleys in a matter of minutes—the frontliners' narratives illustrate the challenges that personal experiences of wildfire can pose to non-fire-professional storytellers. In this body of contemporary environmental narratives, we argue, fire unsettles or "deranges" accounts of the biophysical environment as an inert, passive, and extractable background to human affairs. As such, it provides an innovative framework for making sense of the environment in the age of climate crisis that does not assume its predictability or familiarity.

The frontliners' narratives encourage us to expand our understanding of how narratives function—both the structures by which rural storytellers represent fire, and the emotional work these narratives demand of interpreters as they read/listen to these attempts at sense-making. Precisely because they struggle to articulate explicitly or definitively *what it's like,* they resist the empathic twinning of emotions that tends to dominate studies of the effects of narrative on the real-world attitudes, values, and behaviors of interpreters. In what follows, we examine the narrative resources of the frontliners' narratives and ultimately propose an expansion of the theory of narrative empathy to include *narrative compassion.* First, we spend time with the personal experience narratives of wildfire frontliners and discuss how these stories suggest provocative challenges and updates to theories of narrative empathy. We try to amplify these rural voices that are typically underrepresented or not consulted in fire discourse to better hear their nuances and moments of "affective dissonance," or the unsettling experience of holding more than one conflicting emotion at once (Ladino 22–23). We also query the mechanics of the narratives and identify structures of evaluation by which they resist empathic connections between listeners and characters via their attempts to narrate the incomprehensibility of modern wildfire and yet nevertheless prompt strong emotional reactions from interpreters. Second, we turn to research in the interdisciplinary field of affect studies to develop a theory of narrative attuned to the environmental crisis of the moment in which we work. We show that recent developments in the science of emotions and affect theory challenge many of the core assumptions of theories of narrative empathy, given the complexity

of our affective lives and how difficult it is to truly "feel with" another entity. These challenges are especially relevant to narratives that grapple with the unpredictability and instability of the Anthropocene including, but not limited to, those of wildfire frontliners. We contend that, as a paradigm for understanding experiences related to a rapidly changing environment, empathy becomes counterproductive when the experiences being narrated appear novel, unpredictable, and/or deranged. We also argue that recognizing the capacity for narratives to foster compassion amongst interpreters is an urgent task in this moment of crisis, as affect and emotion scholars argue that compassion is more likely than empathy to prompt prosocial action and community formation.

Unsettling Fire: Narrative Evaluation

The story of Xander,[1] a wheat farmer, is a rich illustration of the texture of the frontliners' narratives of fire. Xander recalls the "feeling of hopelessness" when a fire suddenly "popped out" of the canyon where it was smoldering and onto the prairie: "And the thing I remember most is just how quickly it moved. It was moving across the prairie probably at, oh, I would say twenty or twenty-five miles an hour just consuming . . . and the fire is moving so fast that it—it's there, and it's gone. Unless there's a house or trees in front of it, it's there and it's gone" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. December 14, 2020). As abruptly as the fire makes its appearance, Xander's encounter with the flame front comes to an end with equal and disorienting swiftness, as if nothing happened: "it's literally a minute after it goes over the ground or thirty seconds you can walk right out on top." The frenetic speed and movement of the fire makes it difficult to apprehend visually, blurring present and past together: "it's there and it's gone." Yet the same can be said spatially about fire; "it's gone" in the form of a raging inferno but "it's there" in the physical trace of scorched wheat stubble beneath Xander's feet. The fire also resists clear identification unless it is grounded by figures such as "a house or trees." With such spatial markers in the background, Xander can see the fire—"it's there." Without these markers, "it's gone." Xander's narration of the fire's physical body fosters a sense of confusion for interpreters: it's materially heterogeneous, it lacks discrete spatiotemporal coordinates, and it lapses or equivocates between a suite of binary oppositions—presence and absence, living and nonliving, past and present. As such, it is difficult for interpreters to literally place fire within Xander's narrative.

In addition to being physically and spatially confounding, Xander's description of fire blurs the distinction between living and nonliving matter. The fire is a self-organized/organizing "it" that "popped out" of a sheltering canyon and moved rapidly across the prairie while engaged in the self-sustaining or self-replicating activity of "just consuming," a behavior which goes on uninterrupted unless prevented by "a house or trees in front of it," which might take longer to consume. Fire is also indiscrete or blurred in regard to its material suffusion with different types of living and nonliving matter. The fire begins as a lightning-struck tree, releasing once-living particulate matter into the air as smoke as it gains heat and energy from the tree's living tissue. It then becomes suffused with a wheat crop which, because of its market

value, becomes further suffused, physically and emotionally, with human systems of economic valuation and loss. The movement and behavioral pattern of fire, almost inherently, forces language to give it animality, even aspects of humanity—villainy, for example, for destroying wheat crops.

Xander's narrative illuminates a clear trend that runs across the frontliners' personal experience narratives of wildfire: today's fires indeed appear to us as deranged and, as such, they are difficult to wrap your mind around. Alice gets emotional when narrating her experience of fire: "it was out of my control. And being a Libra, and being the strong woman that I am, I've always pretty much liked to have control of things. And that was out of my control" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. January 27, 2021). Samuel emphasizes the astounding nature of modern wildfire repeatedly in his narrative. He states that he was not so much "scared" by the 1988 Yellowstone fire, but "just you know, awestruck" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. December 14, 2020). He notes that, at times during fires that he has experienced, it is difficult to use his senses to understand the fire. As he explains, "the smoke was so bad you couldn't hardly see. . . . And then you'd get a glimpse of it, and it's coming over the top of the ridge. Just the whole valley seems like it just instantaneously burst, burst into flames." He has a scientific explanation for why it is so difficult to understand and predict modern wildfires: "I mean it, forest fires, get huge, and there's so much heat that they actually create their own atmosphere, their own weather conditions—they get that big. That's hard for people to understand, but it's a fact." Samuel returns several times to the puzzle of modern wildfire in his narrative: "Mother Nature is beyond our comprehension some days," he says; "I mean, a forest fire like Yellowstone is beyond 99.9% of this country's comprehension. Can't comprehend. To quote the news media, "Massive." [laughter] I mean, it's just totally beyond your comprehension."

Our inability to comprehend wildfire—to make sense of what we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste during the event—is perhaps why so many of the frontliners narratives feature passages of implicit and explicit evaluation. Labov defines evaluation as "the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d'être*: why it was told and what the narrator is getting at" (*Language* 366). Oral personal experience narratives, in other words, have an evaluative dimension by which the narrator answers the "so what?" question and explains why the events of a narrative break with the ordinary and thus are worthy of narration. As Labov explains: "evaluative devices say to us: this was terrifying, dangerous, weird, wild, crazy; or amusing, hilarious, wonderful; more generally, that it was strange, uncommon, or unusual—that is, worth reporting. It was not ordinary, plan, humdrum, everyday, or run-of-the-mill" (371).

Labov identifies a number of types of evaluation, including external evaluation (a narrator tells a listener directly what the point of the story is), embedded evaluation (the narrator articulates the sentiment as occurring to them in the moment of the event they are narrating), evaluative action (the narrator tells what people did rather than what they said), and evaluation by suspense of action (the narrator stops the action to call attention to a particular point in the story) (371–74). But in all of these instances, he links evaluation to *sense-making* and, in particular, the making sense of self and the self's experiences. He argues that the evaluative function of the narrative

is especially important if that experience is, like in his recent case studies about narratives of uncontrollable grief, so confounding as to "challenge the linguistic capacity of the speaker and the capacity of language itself" ("Narratives" 126). The failure of language to account for personal experience is similarly acute in the frontliners' stories, such that we see a clear trend of textual markers that point to their inability to represent wildfire. We recognize these markers as highlighting what Robyn Warhol defines as the *supranarratable*: "that which, *according to a given narrative* [. . .] can't be told" (222; emphasis original) or "those events that defy narrative, foregrounding the inadequacy of language [. . .] to achieve full representation" (223).[2] As Warhol explains, instances of the supranarratable "asser[t] that what did happen cannot be retold in words, or explicitly indicat[e] that what did happen will not be narrated because narrating it would be impossible" (222).

We are particularly interested in moments of evaluation and accompanying textual markers of the supranarratable in the frontliners' narratives because, as Amy Shuman and Katharine Young argue, "evaluation is inherently affective," as "affect is what makes events reportable by a narrator" (413). Taking cues from Labov, Shuman and Young understand sense-making as motivating narrators of personal experience narratives: they write that these "narrators do not tell stories to get information across to the hearers," but instead "to indulge themselves and involve their hearers in the affects the telling animates in the storyworld as well as on the storytelling occasion" (413). Following the work of Shuman and Young, we recognize the evaluative elements of personal experience narratives to be key to understanding not only how narrators recapitulate particular personal experiences, but also how such narratives can make sense of and foster specific emotional and affective states amongst narrators *and* their interpreters.

In some moments of evaluation in the frontliners' narratives, fire is supranarratable in that it is an event that is literally missing from the story. Prairie farmer Yalonda illustrates this trend in her narrative of a fire that threatened her property in 2015. Her story begins when a fire creeps downhill toward her place from the opposite side of a canyon, about ten miles away. Yalonda describes taking her tractor disc up to a water tank to begin burying the grain stubble at the top of the canyon and fretting over the windstorm that blows smoke towards her farm. The smoke is so thick that she worries that her husband, who is driving the tractor, might "drive off the edge of the canyon or hit another tractor" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. December 14, 2020). In a moment of extreme summary, Yalonda sketches out the timeline of the fire: "We got started about probably 2:00 in the afternoon, and I don't know, we probably didn't go home until 10:00 or 11:00 that night. And the tractor and disc were going constantly." Narrative time moves faster than story time in this sentence, such that Yalonda's articulation of the fire places much more emphasis on her nervous anticipation of the fire in the paragraphs that precede this summary than the event itself. She renders her narration of the actual fire in ellipsis and the iterative, either blowing past the fire entirely—they "got going" at 2:00 and stopped eight or nine hours later—or articulations of iterative actions that quickly collapse together many of the fire's individual moments: "We were wetting the grass down every five minutes. It gets there and we blot it out." Indeed, the only direct mention of the fire's presence

in Yalonda's narrative—of the fire's actual heat and flame—appears second-hand, via its transformation of the tractor's hood that still has "the waves in it from the plastic melting, it was so close to the flames." Fittingly, the structure and shape of Yalonda's story mimics the experience of the fire itself: narrative time moves relatively slowly in the buildup to the fire via passages of description but then blitzes through the fire itself via a highly condensed summary. As she explains, "when fire moves downhill, it creeps. But once it starts uphill, it's super fast."

Even the most temporally specific and detailed narratives echo this tendency to assert implicitly that the narrator cannot represent fire fully and thus instead focus on the moments before and after. Kristin, who was evacuated from her house, begins her narrative when the power goes out on Labor Day and her sister calls to ask, "Do you see the smoke up on the mountain over there?" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. January 14, 2021). A neighbor then reports that a stump in a recently logged area is on fire; it had been pushed under some dirt in a slash pile and had sat smoldering for almost a year. Kristin and her family see the smoke again a few days later, and she decides to call 911 at 11:15 a.m. while she sits on her porch watching the fire grow. By 11:45 it is clear that she and her family need to run. "Get everything," her husband tells her, and a frenzy of throwing belongings into the truck commences. Kristin notes that she can "see the smoke just getting bigger" and can see "like, dark colors" from a friend's house one mile down the road. By 3 p.m., the fire has consumed one entire side of a mountain and Kristin's husband calls her and the neighbors back to the property to try to contain the fire by dousing it with water from the pool. Kristin does her last check on her house at 2:30 a.m. the next morning, and she and her neighbors spend the next week off work so that they can monitor and extinguish hot spots from the "relentless" fire. Kristin's narrative, like Yalonda's, largely renders fire as supranarratable, such that she does not fully narrate events occurring in between these timestamps. And even the chronological specificity of Kristin's story is misleading, as she continually emphasizes how confusing it all was. "It's kind of crazy," she says in a clear moment of external evaluation; "You kind of lose track of time and everything that's happening." She makes clear in her narrative that pictures and video that she took of the fire afford most of these timestamps, suggesting that it is only in the aftermath of the event, and with the aid of visual and technological cues, that she is able to stitch together a sufficient timeline of her experience. And yet even now, a lack of clarity remains. "It was just one of those crazy, crazy times," she says in another moment of external evaluation. "It was—it was crazy. That was one of the craziest things I've had to go through, ever."

The narration of "crazy, crazy times" in Kristin's narrative illuminates a second, more explicit way in which the frontliners' stories tend to position fire as supranarratable in moments of evaluation: they use textual markers to indicate the failure of language to account for the unpredictability and complexity of present-day wildfire—its seeming derangement and resistance to clear event sequencing or managerial boundaries and its inherent wildness that calls on us to recognize its autonomy. As does Samuel above in his emphasis of wildfire's unknowability, many frontliners speak of their inability to come up with the right language to describe their experiences. In another moment of clear external evaluation, Zack, a rancher, states that modern

wildfires are "scary. They're scary. . . . I'm not sure how to describe it. You're at a loss trying to figure out how to control it" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. December 14, 2020). Uma, an evacuee, describes wildfire as "just so unreal to watch" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. December 14, 2020). Grace notes that wildfires are so difficult to describe because "it's 100% the unknown that causes fear" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. January 15, 2021). Rancher Wendy also struggles for language with which to account for modern wildfire: "I learned it could happen very, very fast. You can't depend on it doing one thing. There's a better word for it than that, that it could be undependable" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. December 14, 2020). Her narration tails off as she fumbles for the right word: "It could just—. . ." Still other frontliners resort to sounds instead of words to explain what it's like to experience fire. Samuel declares "it's all burning and coming at you and it's like *ahhhhh*"; "a half-mile away the ridge would just start—it'd just *boom, boom, boom.*" Uma makes a similar move toward sound to describe a tree bursting into flame: "It was like lighting a wooden stick. It was just like that—*chaa*—and then start on fire. Just like that—*chaa.* Just—I think that we saw five of them happen in front of our eyes." The "*chaa*" sounds, coupled with the false starts and incomplete clauses of these sentences—"Just . . . Just . . ."—illustrate the challenge of narrating fire. Uma expresses this difficulty again later in her narrative. "Oh yeah," she says, "I've never seen anything like that before. That level of destruction where you just—It made me think of people, like in countries where they're at war."

Relatedly, some frontliners' narratives become highly figurative when narrating fire, implying that one path to making sense of wildfire is via its relation to something else in rich moments of evaluation by the suspension of action. Of course, such figurative language is itself inherently strange—figurative devices like metaphor and metonymy are the rhetorical tricks of literary and poetic language that defamiliarize the subjects they represent. In a standard metaphor, the target is made strange via its association with a new source. Yet in the frontliners' metaphors, it is the supranarratable source (wildfire) that is made knowable via its association with a more familiar target in a pause for clarifying comparison. Both Uma and Fannie, the latter of whom lost her house in a fire, liken wildfire to a warzone, while Samuel describes it as "like playing with a rattlesnake." Tessa, an evacuee, is even more creative, making sense of the fire by tying it to its elemental opposite, water: "I also just remember it being really pretty. It was just black before—I mean, it was nighttime, and so it was just pitch black everywhere except for like this line of sparkling orange because everything behind it was burned. So it was just a line where the fire was itself that was . . . sparkling . . . it was kind of like—it reminds me of like, water dripping? . . . The way that the surface tension makes it kind of move more in one area and then the rest of it gets kind of gets tugged behind it. So it's just kind of this uneven wavy line that's all generally moving down" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. December 14, 2020). Tessa's narrative is yet another example of the difficulty with which frontliners articulate modern wildfire. But instead of positioning fire explicitly as supranarratable ("*chaa,*" "*ahhhhhh*"), Tessa makes sense of her experience by rendering it in highly figurative terms. Fire becomes water in Tessa's narrative, its unstoppable movement into new terrain a form of bizarre surface tension that leaves her awestruck.

A final major trend of evaluation in the frontliners' narratives is the turn to nonhuman bridge characters. In these moments of evaluative action, the human narrator attempts to make sense of their experience by considering the effects of the wildfire on animals. Suzanne Keen defines a bridge character as one that helps narrative interpreters cross a "significant barrier of [. . .] difference," or access emotions and experiences that would otherwise be unavailable (68). In the frontliners' narratives, we often find a bridge character functioning similarly as a mechanism of accessibility that helps make sense of a personal experience that is inherently incomprehensible.

Alice offers a particularly rich illustration of the evaluative function of bridge characters when she turns her attention to animals. "But oh, my gosh," she says, "the fear and the devastation and the dead animals and the horses, and the cattle that were lost and wild game and the birds and everything." Alice notes the "look on their faces," and draws particular attention to "the fear of what the animals look like when they're running for their lives. It's just horrifying." Fear of fire is a refrain that she repeats in her narrative, and at this crucial moment, when articulating the magnitude of that fear, Alice uses animal bridges to communicate her emotions. She continues:

> Yeah, there was owls that would fly. And then we had, oh gosh, what was that? Some kind of big old sage hen that come down here, and she was scorched. And she lasted for a while, and then she died. . . . And of course we had rattlesnakes in the yard, which they didn't last very long. . . . But the wild horses was what was really sad. All the wild horses that were burnt and then they had to—the cattle that were burnt so bad that the ranchers had to go up and shoot them. Some of them have been raised from baby calves. And you pushed them out every year. You know them. You walk through them. You talk to them. Some of them you can touch on the backside. And they're right there when you want to see them. And to have something like that happen, and those ranchers have to go up, and shoot them, was horrible. Just absolutely horrible, and so senseless. The whole thing was so senseless.

We see a familiar articulation of the fire as illogical in Alice's narrative. Fire's supranarratability registers in the narrative not only in familiar evaluative tropes such as ellipsis, but also in her pivot to the animals with whom she shares her ranch. Her narrative encourages interpreters to access the horror and senselessness of the fire via vulnerable nonhuman characters that cannot escape.

Wendy's narrative features a similar bridge when she talks of her neighbors' house burning. "A friend of mine worked with this one guy," she says, "and the fire came so fast that all they had time to do was grab their dogs and go put their chicken—their chicken coop didn't catch on fire. But the fire burned through it so much. And the chicken's feet were burned." Wendy continues: "and the poor little things. Their toenails were burnt off. And the rooster's comb was burned off. And their feathers were singed. And their—. . . Two of them died. They were just pretty burned. And other ones—their feet are very small. They lost a lot of their feet." As in Alice's narrative, this story literally displaces Wendy and her neighbors, instead inviting listeners to take on

the terror and confusion of the wildfire via the experience of burned and singed birds. The birds become a bridge by which interpreters access the horror of the fire.

A Theory of Narrative Compassion

The frontliners' personal experience narratives of wildfire are powerful illustrations of their attempts to make sense of this confusing phenomenon. Via various mechanisms of evaluation, the frontliners' narratives feature a range of structures and resources that foreground the wildness and supranarratability of this experience. As such, they suggest a kind of narrative and affective transference that does not require empathy—an emotional twinning or matching—but still promotes concern and understanding across boundaries of difference through what we call *narrative compassion.* In this section we define, frame, and illustrate this new concept by engaging research at the interdisciplinary intersection of narratology, affect studies, and the environmental humanities. We then suggest that narrative compassion may be better suited than empathy to bridge divides and promote prosocial behaviors in the real-world context of "unhinged" environmental crisis.

A favorite argument of many environmental humanities and narrative scholars is that storytelling can give narrative interpreters access to what it's like to experience particular storyworlds: that narratives, via their immersive properties, can transport readers (and listeners) to alternate worlds in which they can access experiences they would otherwise not know. This line of thinking is indebted to Suzanne Keen's theory of narrative empathy. In her seminal *Empathy and the Novel,* Keen defines empathy as "a spontaneous sharing of feelings, including physical sensations in the body, provided by witnessing or hearing about another's condition" (xx) and affirms "the robustness of narrative empathy, as an affective transaction accomplished through the writing and reading of fiction" (xv). She positions narrative empathy as a key component of narrative interpretation, stating unequivocally that "the affective transaction across boundaries of time, culture, and location may indeed be one of the intrinsic powers of fiction and the novel a remarkably effective device for reminding readers of their own and others' humanity" (xxv). There is no question, she writes, that readers often feel empathy with the characters of whom they read, and this emotional contagion is an essential part of the reading process.

The dominant theory of narrative empathy suggests that narratives are powerful vectors of emotional contagion; that is, via character identification and narrative situation, narratives can foster empathic connections between readers and characters and thus open up those readers to previously inaccessible emotions and experiences. But this work rests on a set of assumptions about what emotions are and how we share them that recent affect studies scholarship challenges. Among these assumptions is that at least some basic emotions are universal and transferable in a straightforward, one-to-one sense—an assumption that recent developments in the interdisciplinary field of affect studies, including the science of emotions, challenge. Indeed, some scientific research suggests a new paradigm for understanding emotions in which even a single individual's affective life is inconsistent, idiosyncratic, extremely com-

plex, and not easily transferable to others. Lisa Feldman Barrett's *How Emotions Are Made* overturns what she terms the classical view, in which emotions are discrete personal experiences that can be easily located (fingerprinted) in fMRI scans and recognized in facial expressions. With research anchored in her own lab as well as meta-analysis of psychological studies, Feldman Barrett develops a theory of constructed emotions, which recasts affective experiences as highly contingent instances of emotion that we create in and with our bodies, brains, environments, and culture, and via a process of simulation. Meanwhile, theorists of affect informed by feminist, queer, and cultural studies traditions have long sounded similar notes. Sara Ahmed, for instance, explains: "Emotions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don't necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling" as another person does (10). From both scientific and theoretical perspectives, then, to feel precisely what someone else feels—to truly "feel with" another human or nonhuman being—is understood as an exceedingly rare phenomenon.

Rather than empathy, the emotional dynamic that we see at play in personal experience narratives of wildfire that foreground confusion, evaluation, and sense-making aligns most strongly with what Paul Bloom defines as *compassion*: "positive feelings toward others, a desire that others do well and do not suffer, as when you wish that an anxious friend would feel more calm without necessarily feeling any anxiety yourself" (25). Jennifer Goetz and her colleagues similarly define compassion as "the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help" (351). Rather than a synonym for empathy or a variant, or hybrid, of love and sadness, Goetz's research team considers compassion as a distinct emotion with a unique evolution, as well as part of an "emotion family" that includes sympathy, pity, and empathic concern (352). Bloom, too, has collaborated with other researchers to show that empathy and concern are distinct psychologically, and that "concern for others is a uniquely positive predictor of prosocial action whereas empathy is either not predictive or negatively predictive of prosocial actions" (Jordan et al. 1107). These research teams reinforce numerous studies suggesting compassion is a moral emotion that motivates prosocial, altruistic behavior (Batson and Shaw; Omoto, Malsch, and Barraza). Studies also suggest that compassion can be nurtured with deliberate training and can become "an enduring affective trait" (Goetz et al. 364) through practices such as loving kindness meditation (Condon et al.; DeSteno).

This scientific research dovetails with environmental humanities scholarship. Sarah Jaquette Ray advocates for what she calls "compassionate curiosity," a renewable resource that can promote justice. Ray rightly notes that the phrase "compassion fatigue" mixes up the terminology, confusing compassion for empathy. (It's really "empathy fatigue" that is a problem.) She writes: "compassionate curiosity, by helping us understand the other side's myriad and nuanced positions, can achieve the desired end of building trust enough for cooperation" (110). Because compassion does not seek to overcome difference but rather to apprehend another's complexity, it can elude many of the pitfalls of empathy—among them condescension, in-group biases, and burnout. Indeed, we understand the limitation imposed by compassion on *not* being

able to feel or claim aspects of the other's experience as more of an asset: a foundation for good faith dialogue and solidarity among agents.

Empathy, by contrast, has the potential to mask inequities by making us think or feel we are bridging boundaries. Sympathy, another term with currency in narrative studies that scholars often summarize as "feeling for" as opposed to empathy's "feeling with," involves a similar conflation. As Faye Halpern argues, "sympathy's ethical ambiguity derives in part from its disregard for fine distinctions between self and other" (135); she states that "sympathy's effectiveness depends on the reader's engaging in ethically suspect kinds of role-taking or on her giving up her critical distance" (126). Empathy and sympathy also have the tendency to identify the other as a victim whose agency requires our own to operate politically or existentially. We recognize that the healthy boundaries of compassion are especially important in narratives that task interpreters with crossing significant divides, including those of ideology (liberal/conservative), geography (urban/rural), education (specialist/non-specialist), identity (race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender), and species (human/nonhuman), and doubly important in narratives that resist articulating what it's like to experience something that appears to be unhinged or unimaginable.

Xander's testimony nicely illustrates the role of compassion in personal experience narratives of wildfire. At first, his story seems to support conventional conceptions of narrative empathy, in that it highlights the impact of a specific narrative—a Netflix documentary about the 2018 Camp Fire—on his own relationship to fire and his understanding of his new neighbors, who lost their home in California and moved to Idaho. He explains:

> I watched the documentary and I don't know if you've ever seen them, but you really should watch it. It's crazy. . . . It is scary. It got my attention, because there's a lot of video that was taken by the people with iPhones, cell phones. There's this one story of a school that evacuated, and a kindergarten teacher got on the bus with her kids. . . . There was smoke all around, and she had—excuse me—she had the kids praying on the bus. She was praying that they would die of smoke inhalation and not of fire. I mean, you watch that documentary, and it is an eye opening, but just hearing first hand from my neighbors about how fast it happened, and they had literally minutes to get out, and if you were a minute or two late, you died, and so, hearing that first-hand account of that, you can just kind of see in their eyes that it still haunts them after several years.

Xander "sees" the experiences of his neighbors because he's engaged with specific stories and first-hand footage from the Camp Fire via the documentary. Notably this footage is "crazy" and "scary," words that commonly emerge in external evaluations in the frontliners' stories. Witnessing the fire itself in documentary footage is a vital access point for his neighbors' story. Having seen the footage provides a foundation for understanding his neighbors' experience, but what ultimately makes the affective dimensions of that experience resonant to him is "hearing first-hand from [his] neighbors how fast it happened" and "see[ing] in their eyes that it still haunts them."

He describes watching the Netflix documentary about the fire as "an eye opener" but quickly shifts to noting the "haunt[ed]" eyes of his neighbors as they tell him their story. This comparison suggests that emotional contagion might be more likely to occur in a face-to-face conversation about fire than a recorded and/or transcribed testimony. However, even here Xander conveys affective distance—he sees their emotion in their eyes but does not say that he feels "haunted" himself. Xander then shifts to losses closer to home, mentioning a nearby small town that was recently destroyed by fire. Again, there is an evaluative component to his descriptions of emotion. "I think it's like a death in the family," he says, and "it's just something that would be hard to relate to unless you experienced it." Xander both alludes to the limits of primitive empathy here—we can't feel what someone else is feeling unless we've experienced it—and extends the kind of compassion and concern for which Bloom argues to both his new neighbors and the residents of the nearby small town. We find this evaluative recognition interspersed in other interviews as well. Melissa states bluntly that "you don't truly understand the situation until you've been through the situation." Fannie expresses a similar idea when she recalls emotions from her own previous first-hand experience in empathizing with other frontliners. After losing her house in a fire, Fannie has become a dedicated volunteer working in pop-up crisis response shelters. Crying, she tells the newly homeless residents of the shelters, "It's okay. It's going to be hard. I've been there."

The suggestion, in Xander's, Melissa's, and Fannie's narratives, is that you had to be there, or at least have direct access to the visuals and sounds of a fire, to have a rich sense of what it's like. Yet even here, amongst this select in-group of people with first-hand experience of wildfire, we see emotional relationships that more closely resemble compassion than empathy—a feeling *toward* rather than a feeling *with.* When Xander sees that his neighbors are still haunted by the fire, it isn't empathy he's feeling, but compassion. When Fannie says "I've been there," she extends her loss and grief to others who are going through something similar, but she does not pretend to feel precisely what they are feeling. The affective connection provided by the frontliners' storytelling suggest that what we feel and what someone else feels are unlikely to be the same emotion, especially if the events you narrate stem from confusing circumstances of which you are still in the process of making sense. But the narratives nevertheless illustrate how the frontliners translate intense instances of emotion into feelings of care and concern for someone else, thereby encouraging interpreters to do the same. Importantly, this development of care often crosses significant barriers of difference in the frontliners' narratives. Xander shows that it is possible to feel compassion toward people who have "got houses built where they shouldn't be built," even while finding their decisions frustrating.

The frontliners' narratives demand that we expand our understanding of the emotional work of narratives beyond empathy's twinning. These stories don't provide interpreters sufficient textual cues to feel *with,* but they do encourage interpreters to feel *toward.* In their emphasis on sense-making and evaluation, they foreground the continuing confusion of what it's like to experience wildfire and thus resist our direct simulation of that experience; instead, they give us enough cues to foster an ethic of

care within a context of emotions and affects that scholars increasingly associate with anthropogenic climate change, including anxiety, grief, anger, and bewilderment.

Feeling Toward and Standing With

Expanding the narratological model to recognize compassion has widespread implications for our moment, beyond the strangeness and unpredictability of contemporary fire behavior. For today's wildfires are but one instantiation of the extractive, destructive, and increasingly chaotic forces yoked together under the various unsatisfying terms we use to describe our geologic epoch. Most environmental humanities scholars have reluctantly embraced "Anthropocene," though other, also imperfect, terms—Capitalocene (Moore), Chthulucene (Haraway), and Plantationocene (Haraway et al.), in addition to Pyne's Pyrocene—circulate as well. Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright suggest the term Anthropocene is both "a useful marker" for a "new era of natural history" and "unhelpful" since "there is no such thing as a universal 'human' agent that precipitated this new era in planetary history, and no such thing as a common vantage point from which 'we all' understand and experience it" (x). This coarse-grained and misleading view of the Anthropocene paints the picture of a single species agent having transformative effects on the Earth's natural systems and obscures the concrete human actors behind the Anthropocene's moment of transition. We know, for example, that today's 1°C rise in global surface temperature over pre-industrial levels is not the result of universal humanity but a small handful of the world's wealthiest economic nations. The reduction of experience inherent in the Anthropocene thus not only erases issues of social-environmental justice from the geological frame but, more fundamentally, blurs cause and effect: it hides the story of how certain human practices and perspectives, more so than others, lead to the instantiation of the climate crisis. It also clouds the politics of who *tells* the story of the "human" epoch and muddies the idea that a "shared" narrative of the Anthropocene narrates but one group's experience. The bird's eye view of the Anthropocene as a geologic era precipitated and defined by a universal human species agent—which is the default view of the Anthropocene, as Mann and Wainwright point out—elides the particular social and geopolitical deposits by which the Anthropocene is laid down and reifies a narrative that overrides barriers of difference.

Similarly, the practice of empathy stumbles on false assumptions of a common human experience. As Suzanne Keen argues, "empathy loses credence the moment it appears to depend on a notion of universal human emotions, a cost too great to bear even if basic human rights depend upon it" (147). Accordingly, empathy risks being yet another example of a dominant group's "imposition of its own values on cultures and peoples that it scarcely knows, but presumes to "feel with," in a cultural imperialism of the emotions" (147–48). Growing the narratological model to recognize narrative compassion sidesteps this shared risk of the modern climate crisis and empathy by maintaining the singularity of an experience—especially one that does not equally affect people across various cultural, geographical, and social divides. It also encourages us to recognize the ways in which narratives—especially those invested in

making sense of the confusing climate realities of the Anthropocene—can encourage interpreters to respect rather than erase differences in identity and confront rather than elide the inequities of our moment.

We see the social and environmental benefits of compassion in the frontliners' narratives in representations of strangers, or even enemies, facing fire and its aftermath together. Nichole tells us that a shared first-hand experience of wildfire was "a defining moment for our community"; she was particularly struck by two men who "don't like each other" shaking hands and saying "I'm glad you're okay" (Interview with Kayla Bordelon. January 6, 2021). Grace simply says that "the community kind of sticking together was really nice." These moments of togetherness often come with intense emotions. Kristin gets choked up while explaining how it's "almost heart exploding to see the amount of love and just random people that you don't even know" coming together to support each other. This emphasis on the first-hand sharing of emotion and experience and the bonding and community formation that can follow facilitates emotional connections based upon humility and care, rather than a cultural imperialism of the emotions that Keen identifies as a major risk of narrative empathy.

Furthermore, this practice of humility and care has implications for fire management and policy. Emily is an exceptional subject in our case study in that she is not a rural rancher or farmer but a fire professional. In her narrative, she expresses frustration with people building homes in indefensible spaces, being reluctant to take basic precautions to protect their homes and refusing to evacuate when these homes are at risk. She is both angry and compassionate when discussing the "agonizing pain" felt by nonhuman animals burning alive in fires and the "farmers crying" at the loss of cattle they have often birthed: "These are people who love the land. They love their animals, and then to watch a fire decimate them, it's horrible" (Interview with Michael Decker. December 14, 2020). Emily makes an interesting move to express the limits of empathy here: "I cry for you," she says, "You don't know me, but I still have—the empath in me dies every time somebody makes a dumb decision." Her articulation of "crying for" others who have suffered preventable losses echoes Xander's speculation about how his new neighbors and the residents of the nearby small town must have felt and the compassion that follows. Both expressions of compassion fall short of empathy as Keen defines it—an emotional sharing—and Emily even suggests her ability to feel empathy "dies" a little each time she witnesses preventable loss.

At the same time, Emily can marshal compassion for people who don't know better: "They're not fire savvy. They don't know, so you have to start and bring yourself back and sort of be empathetic to that person who doesn't know anything, and you're explaining fire to them from the very, very, very beginning, and you have to think back of how you were when you (or if you ever were) a flatlander." For Emily, empathetic connection is a starting rather than end point of care: a state of sharing that enables the experienced fire professional to know what unsavvy "flatlander[s]" do not know about fire for the purpose of educating them "from the very beginning." Her narrative is a powerful illustration of the risks of empathy fatigue and the benefits of compassionate curiosity. The empath in Emily might "die" after the fact, but before the fact it operates as a form of care and compassion aimed at preventing, as opposed to merely consoling, future victims. Her narrative suggests that for fire professionals

who are at high risk for empathic distress and affective burnout, a more detached affective response—compassion without the sharing of affect—is far preferable to affective empathy.

The mechanisms by which the frontliners' narratives maintain some emotional and experiential distance—by which they insist that there are many different experiences of modern wildfire, and that some facet of those experiences may remain inaccessible to those of us who do not have first-hand experiences of fire—are an important buffer in this moment in which anthropogenic climate change affects communities vastly differently depending upon wealth, location, political representation, levels of development, and race. The frontliners' stories resist the formation of a universal "human" agent with a common vantage point from which "we all" share understanding and experience; rather, they suggest the importance of maintaining various lines of difference, both within the human experience and beyond it. They also help to develop new relationships to the physical environment and each other that aren't based on extraction, possession, stability, or control. Among potential solutions to today's devastating and unpredictable wildfires are fire management tactics that are rooted in respect for the agency of both fire itself, the various human "others" who are not like "us," and the nonhuman species with which we share our planet. The frontliners' narratives remind us that while humans are nominally at the center of this epochal stage, we are just another character with limited agency in a global drama, part of a network of interconnected, multi-scalar, multispecies communities that must collectively confront the impacts of a rapidly changing climate. Landscape-scale change, whether by fire or climate, takes on different appearances and meanings at the finer scale of individual experience. Like the frontliners' personal experience narratives of wildfire, many of the stories that grapple with today's climate crisis represent experiences of what seems to be deranged and unhinged. These narratives tend to emphasize confusion by foregrounding evaluation and sense-making and, as such, they are often idiosyncratic, iterative, and very personal. And they ultimately suggest that compassion is a fruitful framework for finding commonality in the unpredictable and seemingly unhinged Anthropocene.

Endnotes

1. To preserve anonymity, we have changed the names of all frontliners. IRB protocols, and the long length of each frontliners' personal experience narrative, prevent us from printing full transcripts of each interview.

2. In her definition of supranarratable, Warhol builds upon Gerald Prince's concept of disnarration, or those "passages [in a narrative] that consider what did not or does not take place" (3). She explains that the supranarratable is one of four categories of the unnarrated, or "those passages that explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrative's refusal to narrate" (Warhol 221). The others are the "subnarratable" ("events too insignificant or banal to warrant representation" [222]), the "antinarratable" ("transgresses social laws and taboos, and for that reason remains unspoken" [224]), and the "paranarratable" ("transgresses a law of literary genre without being recognized as sub-, supra-, or antinarratable" [226]).

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