

# CRITICAL PRACTICES OF PLACE: DECOLONISATION AND REINHABITATION

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## Abstract

This paper proposes that a practice-led research methodology embedded with a process of Decolonisation and Reinhabitation as co-dependent forms of analysis can generate a creative practice for environmental mutualism, and, a critical practice of place. The paper further argues that such a practice is necessary in the Anthropocene towards a critical bioregional understanding of ‘living well’ within place. Personal bioregional perspectives on making are interrogated towards the consideration of a new types of cartography; to define the locating of creative ideas and practices to bioregional specificity. The author explores their own domestic history and contemporary practices as case study towards emergent forms of environmental-arts practice.

KEYWORDS: Place, decolonisation, reinhabitation

## INTRODUCTION

I introduce a lot of preliminary thought in this paper. A great deal of it I say with honesty is ill-explored territory (territory being a term I use very lightly). I offer these thoughts not as academic *fait accompli* but as contribution for other researchers to take up, contest, challenge, re-work or potentially discard to the rubbish-heap of philosophical inquiry. In this way, the paper is much more like a set of prompts, questions and provocations than a series of questions answered. I am hoping this paper itself might be a kind of creative practice of place, the very same that this paper sets to outline and therein be itself a succession of ‘...and(s)?’. Equally this might be considered a position piece that hovers and buzzes indeterminately that tomorrow I too will re-work or rubbish.

I center this discussion on two projects. An exhibition called *Uncharting Memories / Contesting Geographies*, and a performance *The Sumbiotarian Afternoon Tea*. Both held in April 2017.

## *LOCATING THE RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER*

It has become, and quite reasonably so, a standard practice when discussing decolonising theories and practices to locate the researcher. Whilst this research is not about working directly with Australia's First Nation populations, it does traverse decolonisation discourses, and deals directly in environmental and place-based knowledges. It would be impossible not to acknowledge that the land on which I live and toil daily has the life, blood, sweat and tears of 50,000+ years of Australia's first inhabitants, despite colonial attempts to eradicate the history from the landscape. It is therefore valuable to provide a contextualising statement on the researchers position of relative social, cultural, economic and political power. This is particularly relevant given that my specific regional location in Australia has been described variously as a landscape of encounter (Orchard D & Orchard P 2016), and, a contact zone of contested place stories (Sommerville 2007). It is these aspects that I attempt to navigate as research and practice, both performative & visual, and, academic & domestic.

I identify as cis male. I am white, and to the best of my family knowledge an Australian of recent English and European family heritage. I occupy the privileged position of being university educated, and being in a state of comparative economic control. It is precisely this position of power that through embodied research I find necessary critique of my own practice. I am interested in the ways in which the histories, and contemporary realities of colonisation permeate through my current living practices. This constant critique is undertaken so that I might personally challenge those practices, and in so doing challenge the practices of others. Noting that this is about self-reflectivity and finding a personal mode of practice that is decolonised and reinhabited. It is not being prescriptive on what makes a meaningfully decolonised and reinhabited practice for anyone else.

It will come to be important in understanding a critical practice of place that location of the researcher is both important in that some things cannot be changed. It is also unimportant in that those things that cannot be changed might also be things that can be changed. This seems at first dichotomous. What I mean is;

- a) things that cannot be immediately changed interiorly to the practitioner/practice, might be changeable in ways external to, and in interaction with the practitioner/practice; and
- b) things that cannot immediately be changed external to the practitioner/practice, can be changed interior to the practitioner/practice.

This means that all external-change necessitates internal-change, and, all internal-change is equally external-change. In that way, psycho, soma, holi, endēmos; all are in constant engagement with each other, entangled in constant movement and flux, and that this is a liberating rather than a confining factor in the search for new, and old knowledges. This means being accountable to place, particularly being accountable to place-change.

It must be recognised that colonisation (and the way in which I use it in this paper) is not limited to the subordination of indigenous (human) communities. Colonisation has always included the simplification of the natural landscape including conquering of land, infantilisation of plants and animals, and subordination of non-human or other-than-human entities.

I contextualise this creative practice in and around my experiences in the house, home and my own straddling of domestic and academic life. Perhaps this the start of a manifesto, a declaration of personal intent.

## A CRITICAL CREATIVE PRACTICE OF PLACE: DECOLONISATION & REINHABITATION (A PERSONAL ACCOUNT)

I want to begin with the first of many proclamations, that a critical creative practice of place should aim to;

- a) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonisation); and
- b) identify, recover, and create materials, spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation).

The twin aims of this *Decolonisation* and *Reinhabitation* are in large part informed by David Gruenwalds' place-conscious education (Gruenwald 2003a), and, critical pedagogies of place (Gruenwald 2003b) and cognizant of Margaret Somervilles' Place literacies. I have taken Gruenwald's' critical pedagogy of place and changed it very little to articulate the underlying aims of a *critical creative practice of place*. The paired emphasis on *Decolonisation* and *Reinhabitation* allows for the *domains of practice*

(Sullivan 2010) around place-based enquiry to form acute focus in creative practice research. It must be said that certain domains of practice tend towards specific methodological approaches and frameworks for visual and performing arts knowing. This is not a prescriptive exercise however and is not aiming for a one-size fits all approach. The reality of personal circumstance and difference necessitates that others might find alternate approaches to the same aims more meaningful and useful to them. It is simply that for the purposes of my critical creative practice of place, that the ultimate end in a visual and performative arts projects and making is a process linked to Sullivans' *situations and actions*.

I have always considered my creative practice as a form of situated cognition (a thinking in location) and an embodied practice (responsive to its setting). That embodiment includes the whole of my existence and its intersections / intra-actions in constant reflective self-analysis and critique. According to Sullivan this form of visual arts knowing resides principally in the *critical domain* stating; where critical purposes are paramount, thinking occurs as situated cognition and the thought processes are responsive (Sullivan 2010 p134). This embodiment begins with regularity as a method of deconstruction in the critique of *emphasis and omission*, both systemic and structural, within and outside my being. This provides movement across the *Explanatory dimension* from *structure to action*, from finding problems to creating critique. These critiques are of the social, cultural, environmental and political liberties I am afforded through the lottery of my circumstance. This process includes the ways in which I take advantage of personal freedoms, and how these freedoms might come at the expense of human and non-human others freedom and liberties. It is about deconstructing and rebuilding a personal narrative towards a bioregional perspective that is multilaterally decolonised. A simpler explanation from Sullivan would be that it is critique of how things are, and how they might be (Sullivan 2010 p107). Equally important is what could, should or might-not be. This critique should be an ongoing and unending process of deeper examination with both forward and backwards steps to be mapped from a constant center (milieu / context).

The second stage of the practice traverses Sullivans *Change dimension* moving between critical and interpretivist domains as a dialectical method. Here projects are taken from critique of structure, to taking action within personal, or interpersonal agency. In this mode of re-working and re-iterating visual and performative actions are undertaken as agents to challenge and change colonising behaviors so that I can reinhabit my social, cultural, environmental and political spaces/places. This is what Sullivan calls in the visual and performing arts practice a critical process of enactment. This is a process of;

- a) critiquing social problems – understanding artworks are part of a wider set of visual agencies and actions, and this adds the potential power to contribute to individual awareness, social change, and cultural debate. (Sullivan 2010 p209); and
- b) visualising problems – representing thoughts and ideas using the symbolic properties that something created can stand for something else. (Sullivan 2010 p209).

There is no end to the process of decolonisation and reinhabitation in that the process of transition and movement is the whole. This process it is not a *transition to*, but an *exchange of*. The process is also not a process of ‘to be’ but instead an ‘and ...and ...and’.

## A CRITICAL CREATIVE PRACTICE OF PLACE: ENVIRONMENTAL MUTUALISM

In thinking through a type of environmentally aware arts practice, I have variously over the years attempted to generate a system for a creative practice that is a critical creative practice of place, or, environmental mutualism. My current parameters are to;

- a) create work that rejects nature and culture as binary and oppositional;
- b) celebrates complexity;
- c) challenges the subordination and infantilisation of the non-human;
- d) works towards the twin aims of Decolonisation and Reinhabitation; and
- e) is a context-specific process of infinite ...and ... and... and.

In many ways, this practice is a sub-practice of a much larger field of my ongoing critical making. At this juncture, I will retire my verbosity for some images with a little explanatory text. The images that follow are wonderful documentary images by a colleague James Farley of my April exhibition *Uncharting Memories / Contesting Geographies*.



Figure 1 - Important Artifacts - a selection of leaves collected by my son

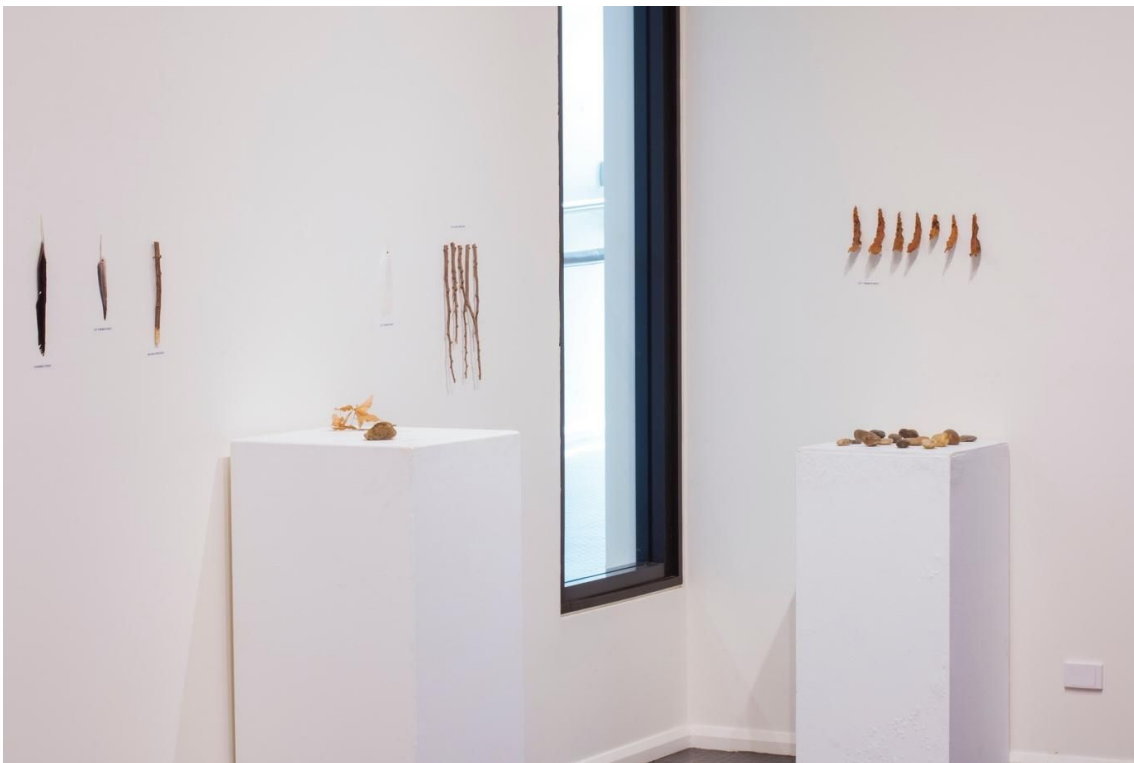


Figure 2 - Important artifacts - a selection of leaves and feathers collected by my son

I have been undertaking a practice with my son Thomas (3) of reciprocity. Children are inveterate storytellers and collectors. Thomas has an inquiring mind and loves (like all children I assume) to collect, collate, categorise and assign stories. Each of these stories are linked to happenings, to places and relationships. We talk about our relationship to the local playground/park as if its thingness is full of life. Thomas tells me that we are responsible to it, and that it doesn't just give to us, but that we must give to it. The way Thomas speaks, saddens me that time has made me see things as inanimate and in service to me, where he can see life and vibrancy. Whilst I teach him to be in the world, what he teaches me about being in the world has been nothing short of revelatory. In Figure 1 a collection of macadamia leaves, and in Figure 2 other aspects of his collection from our trips 'bushwalking'. I describe these collections variably as on loan from Thomas, but he describes them as being on loan from 'the park', 'next door', or 'the road'. I don't know how this story will progress, that perhaps life will enculturate him with competing values. The park itself has been a site of previous exploration and contestation in my work on what the desire for green-grass might mean, and what living in a world without it might do.

To continue in anecdote however, last week (June 2017) we went to the park. Thomas told me that the collection of sticks and pinecones out the back door had to come with us. I asked 'why?'. Apparently, it was very simple, he had only loaned them from the park, and they needed to be returned (as if the park and its trees were like a library, resourced, but in need of our labor). He followed on that in future we should take gifts to the park, but we haven't settled on what would be appropriate as a gift. I like to see this inner growth, and that of my other son (1) for that matter as a kind of giving forwards. That I might teach him well (where I can) and that he might take on some of my performative gesturing. In the exhibition, I used the idea of paying the world forwards through planting *Xanthorrhoea* Figure 3. The local species is known, like all Grass Trees to be incredibly slow growing, averaging about an inch (2.5cm) of growth per year. To reach a level of maturity these seedlings would need to be cared for over the next forty to eighty years. All 24 seeds have sprouted, and I continue to look after them, and will continue to do so as long as I am capable.

Other works in this exhibition included the running of strands from a 4 metre by 7 metre map of the Riverina, Figure 4, 5 & 6, exploring the relationships between creative work, emotions, feelings and specific geographies. These include spaces I shared with my parents and brothers, and spaces I am re-sharing now with my children. I labelled this neurocartography, a physical rendering of my mind's own network of place/space memories.

I have yet to fully explore what this mode of practice might mean for me.



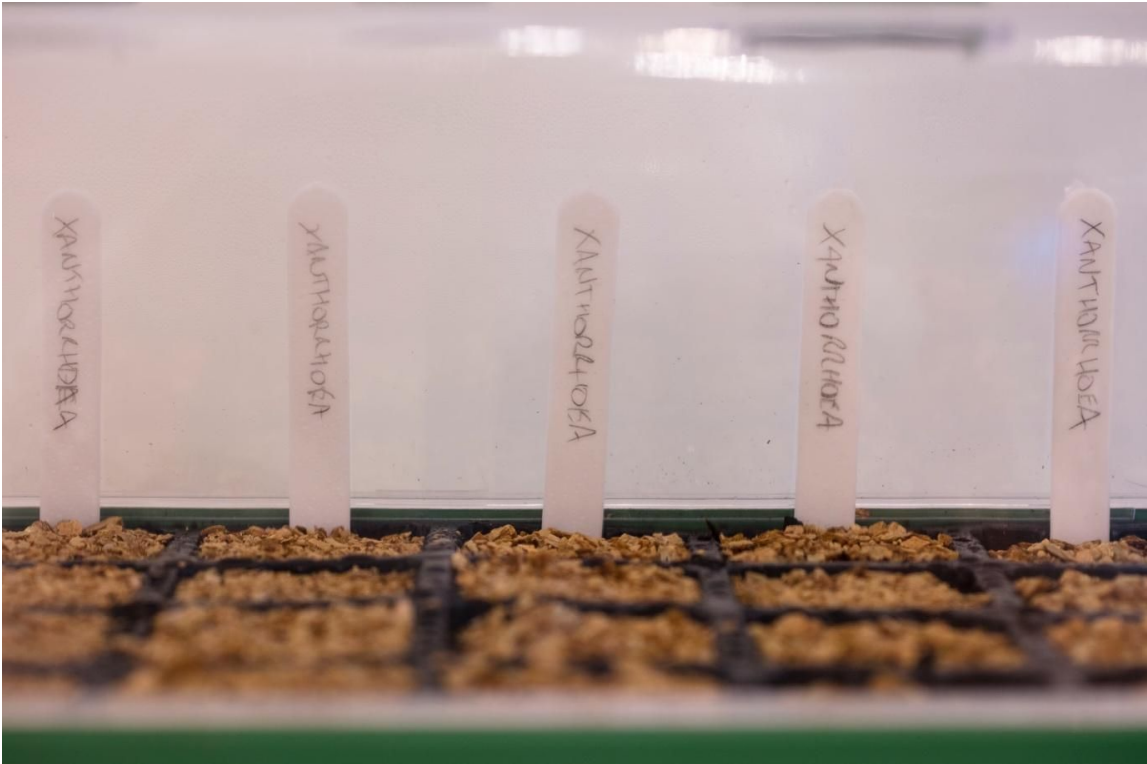


Figure 3 - Xanthorrhoea seedlings

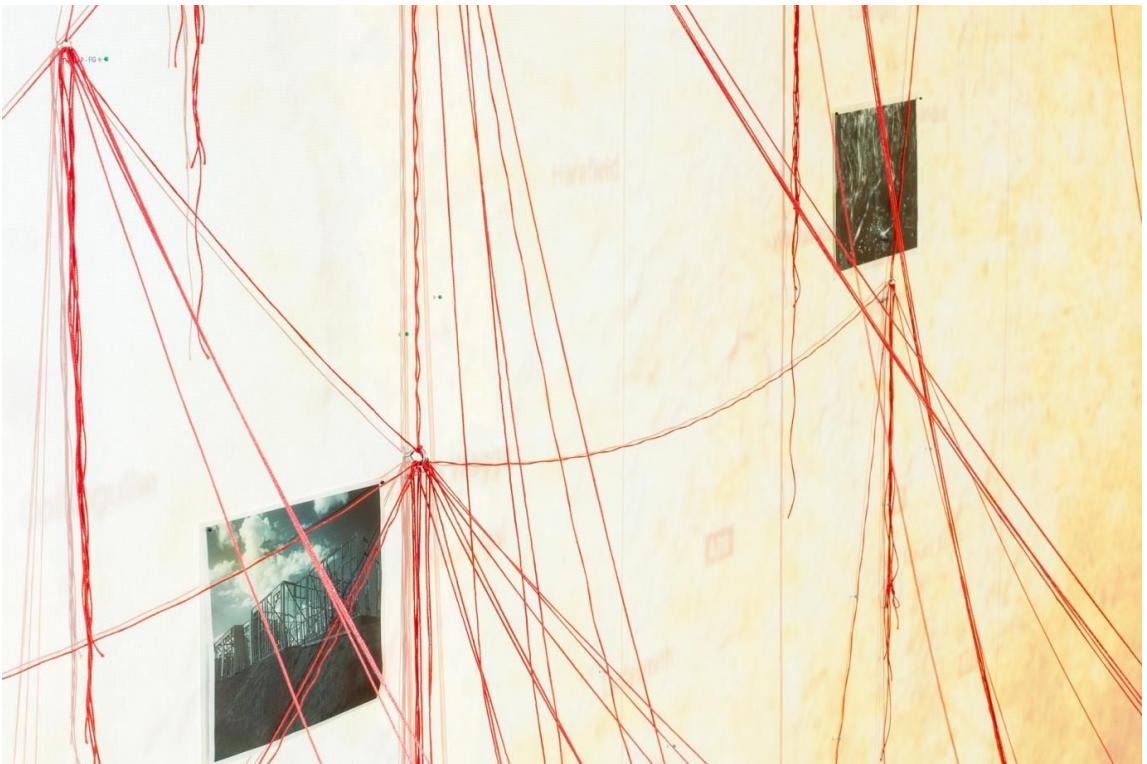


Figure 4 - Neurocartography



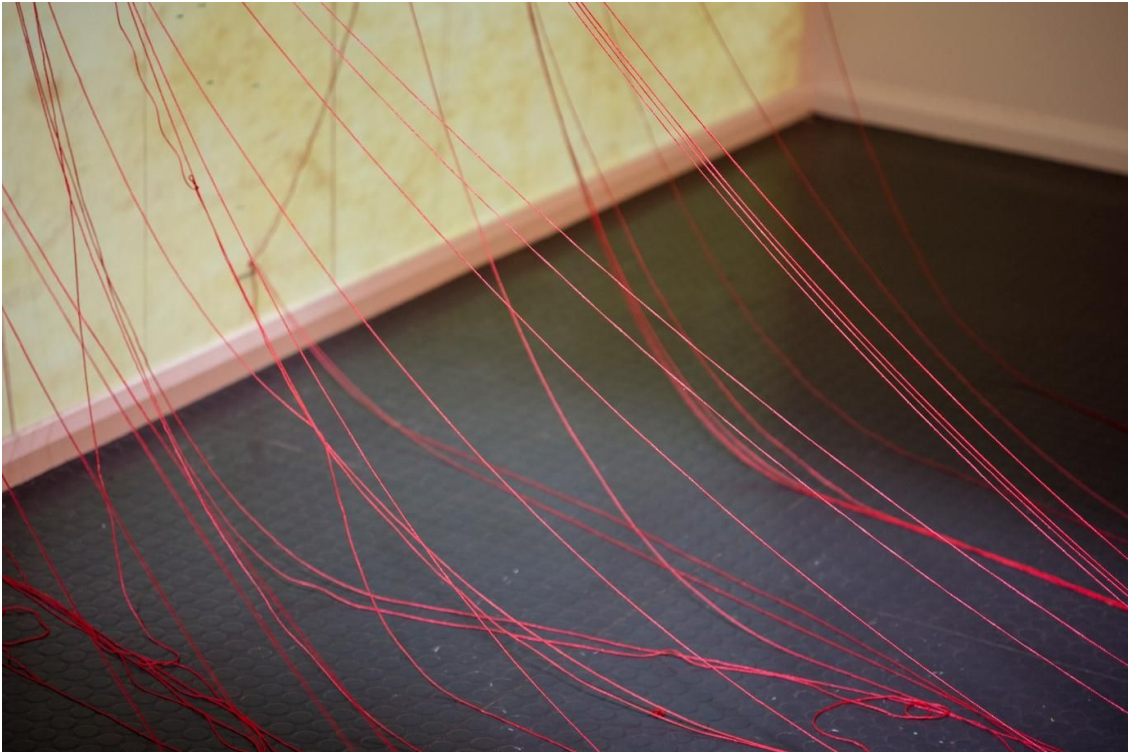


Figure 5 - Neurocartography

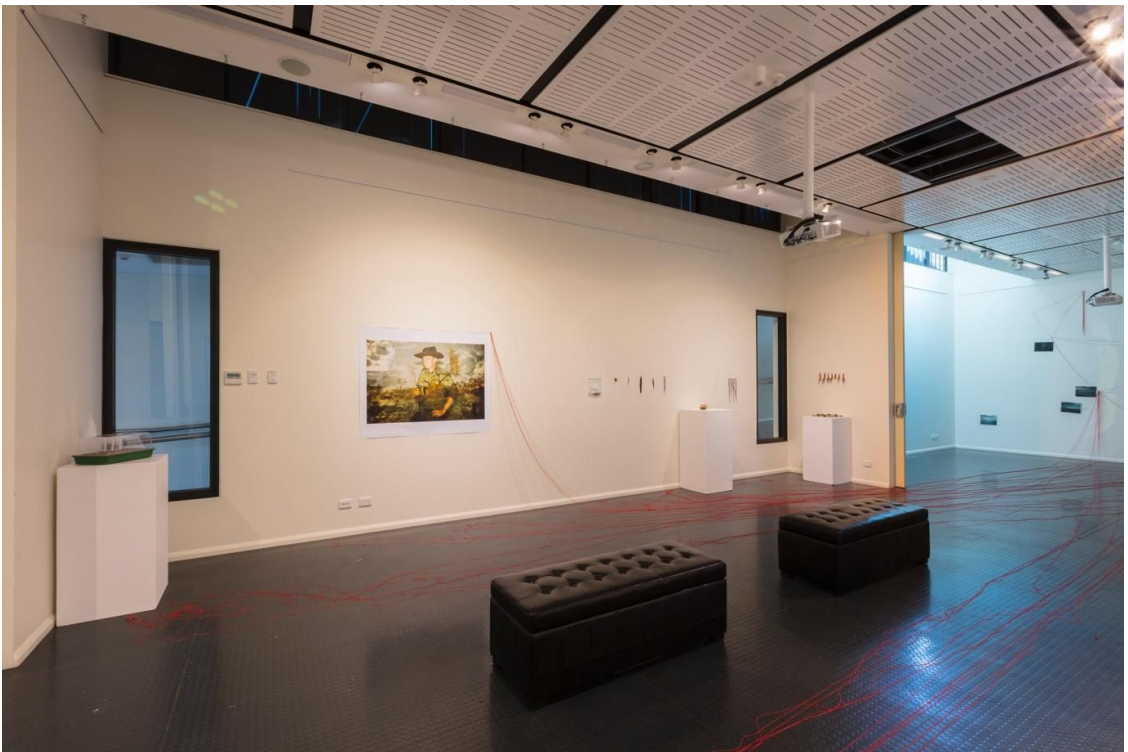


Figure 6 - Neurocartography

I also went through a process of making small maps. Collecting debris and rubbish from roadsides and paddocks and reconstituting them as handmade papers. Stuck to the walls with map pins these works were again a new experiment with geographies.



Figure 7 - Other Geographies

All of these processes remain unresolved. They will continue to change and develop as I grow, and my children grow.

## A CRITICAL CREATIVE PRACTICE OF PLACE: HOW WOULD A POSTHUMANIST EAT?

Between 1990 and 1996 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation would variously play and repeat three series of Bush Tucker Man. I remember as a 5-year-old in 1990 being absolutely enamored with this seemingly personable, nature-loving ex-military man. Major Leslie (Les) Hiddins would become a hero-figure for my childish play and enactment. I would convince my parents in to visiting the army disposals store to get me my own set of Khaki workwear and a slouch style hat. These would become my favorite clothes. After school, I would get home and don my army hat and regardless of the weather head off to climb the granite boulders of my parents' rockery. I have vivid memories of me and my two brothers pretending to be traversing the great northern Australian 'wilderness' and 'living off the land'. I would inevitably end up covered in

the juice of pomegranate, peach, nectarine, oranges and lemons eating straight from the trees. Learning as I went that onion weed and some bugs/slugs taste are not as agreeable. The garden was my wilderness and playground and, at least in my head at that time it offered up food in abundance, and without cost.



Figure 8 - Self Portrait as Major Les Hiddins (The Bushtucker Man), 2017

In early 2017, I spent a significant portion of a fortnights paycheck on a brand new Akubra Sombrero. With the help of textile artist Dr Julie Montgarrett I practiced the art of belting and shaping to create the shape of Les Hiddins trademark hat. I visited the army disposal store, the very same one I visited as a child and purchased the necessary clothes. I recreated the image below layering over images of important sites from my childhood where nature-play took place. The layering of Lake Mungo (the site of a school excursion), with the family home, and new sites of exploration create imagined landscapes, placeless places that are joined not by geography but as psychocartography (a term I will detail in more depth later).

That nature-play was such an important part of my childhood imagination is something I am incredibly thankful for. My knowledge of nature was not deep, but provided for by my parent's desire to bush-walk, understand native grasses (principally their potential in an agricultural rather than natural landscape), and my two younger brothers seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of birds. In the case of my father his life as an agricultural



scientist is now something he, in semi-retirement, is trying to atone for through mass indigenous plantings, running a biodiversity nursery and restoring agricultural land. My mother now joining him in semi-retirement having been a biometrician seems to be searching for something more creative, and something that reconnects her to the world around her. Like my parents, and my brothers (one a promising mycorrhiza expert, the other a talented biological anthropologist), I continue in constant self-reflection and critique in trying to live well, not just with what has been done, but what might still be to come. This is undertaken using the education and knowledge at our disposal (and now, increasingly in academic and interdisciplinary discourse with each other). Most recently in mapping the bush-foods of our region alongside other biodiversity research.

In April 2017, I decided to revisit the idea of the 'garden' and its provision of abundance by hosting what I called a sumbiotarian afternoon tea. This would allow me to revisit the childhood attraction of living off/with the land sparked by Hiddins and fostered by my parents. The aim would be to host an exhibition closing event (as a performative artwork) by sourcing all food from the 2023<sup>2</sup> meters of the piece of land I call home. The term sumbiotarian in the performances title coming from Glenn Albrecht's increasing catalog of earth-related health states. Albrecht coins sumbiotarianism or being a sumbiovore from the greek symbiosis (living together) (Albrecht 2016). Sumbiotarianism as a diet presents precisely the kind of decolonising and reinhabiting challenge towards living well in the place I reside that interests me as an ongoing embodied practice. Sumbiotarianism forces a reconsideration of how we think about food at a fundamental level, especially in regards to anthropocentrism and cerebrocentric food-ethics.

At this performance/event, I would serve grapes, nectarines, an eggplant & capsicum dip with wattle bread, a type of wattleseed and macadamia nut 'biscuit', and a cricket/beetle flour, wattleseed and lemon myrtle 'tea cake'. The idea being that I could feed, for those who were hungry and willing, from the bounty of the land, and in so doing teach a little of what I had learned in the process. The performance simply laid out a spread of food, like a standard gallery opening, or domestic English afternoon or morning tea. I asked people to question what they were eating in that meal (with necessity if they had any allergies). We would work through the ingredients list, discussing the process of collecting Wattleseed, which requires a system of finer and finer weaved baskets to remove seed from seed pod easily like a series of sieves. Discussing the collection of wild honeys, or the grinding of saltbush with ants to create a kind of citric-salt. It was a process of sharing knowledge that is bound up in the specificity of place. All employed to invoke a sense of old knowledge brought to the new. To have a critique of food and diet, bound up in eating, sharing and conversation.

I can see myself continuing this path of inquiry for some time. To learn how to live more neatly within what the world can provide. To live within the climate specificities of my location, increasingly on what is indigenously available to me. To accept that plant consciousness is an ethical consideration, and that we violate sentience when we eat plant based foods, but that this is not a reason to stop eating. That to give life and to take life is a system I am implicated in, and that I must choose how to operate within that system. As Albrecht continues (Albrecht 2016);

When the total system is healthy and human life is harmoniously integrated within it, then sumbioculture has a ghedeistual element to it.

There is no end goal in being labelled as sumbiotarian as the realities of climactic change simply means that my diet must be a constantly shifting thing, and be place-adaptive. I am yet to reach anywhere near a sense of sufficiency, and still largely eat from the fluorescent supermarket system. It is a work in constant progress.

I still have the same question I started with but never promised to answer, how would a posthumanist eat?

I have included a biscuit recipe below.

## SUMBIOTARIAN: MACADAMIA AND WATTLESEED BISCUIT RECIPE



*Figure 9 - Sumbiotarian Afternoon tea - All produce sourced from my block of land*

- 1 tsp strawberry gum
- 1 egg.
- ½ cup of finely ground wattle seed
- ½ cup of coarse ground wattle seed
- ½ cup coarse ground macadamia nut
- ¼ cup of macadamia nut halves
- ½ cup of honey

Preheat oven to 320F (160C). These kinds of biscuits could equally be cooked in a camp oven or other cooking over coals. Combine all ingredients in a large mixing bowl. The

beauty of macadamia nuts, especially fresh is that you do not need extra liquid (oil) as the grinding of them makes an amazing oily paste (if you haven't managed to get fresh nuts, perhaps add some macadamia oil, or substitute ground nuts with macadamia butter).

Shape in to 8-12 rounded balls depending on size preference. They will not increase in size as there is no flours and raising agents. If you are cooking them, they will only need 12 minutes, they will be very crumbly so need to cool before removing from your cooking vessel.

Removing the egg, and putting them in the fridge you could simply not even cook them and have them as a kind of nut and seed bar.

The biscuits in the image also include a kind of lilly pilly jelly (made from Lilly Pilly fruit boiled down with finger limes and Honey added).

## PSYCHOCARTOGRAPHY, SOMACARTOGRAPHY, HOLICARTOGRAPHY AND ENDÊMOCARTOGRAPHY

In thinking through my practice, I have found it hard to find the right words for what I am doing. I am proposing some neologisms to explain particular processes which I do not yet have the right words otherwise to explain. They are below in various states of finitude and disarray;

- a) Psychocartography; (psycho) being of the mind, spirit and unconscious and (cartography) the practice of representation of spatial (placial) information.
  - a. The creative practice of rendering visible the mental health related effects of, and in, place; or
  - b. The creative practice of rendering visible multiple places as one mental state.
  - c. The recognition that ideas/feelings are intrinsically linked to places.
    - i. Further delineation might include carescapes or traumascapes.
- b) Somacartography; (soma) being of the body and (cartography) the practice of representation of spatial (placial) information.
  - a. The creative practice of rendering visible the physical health related effects of, and in, place; or
  - b. The creative practice of performing actions as determined by spacial/placial qualities.



- c. The recognition that bodies and places form specific types of interactions and intra-actions.
  - i. Further delineation might include critical witnessing, eco-folding, posthumanist embodiment.
  
- c) Holicartography; (holi) from holistic, wholeness of mind and body, and (cartography) the practice of representation of spatial (placial) information.
  - a. The creative practice of rendering visible the physical and mental health related effects of, and in, place; or
  - b. The act of performing multiple mental and physical states as a result of an earth-feeling.
  - c. The recognition that the generation of creative work is part of a global networked system of idea-states and physical-states that are in constant engagement at all points simultaneously. This includes non-human physical and consciousness forms.
  
- d) Endēmocartography; (endemo) from endemos/endemic being of a certain area, and (cartography) the practice of representation of spatial (placial) information.
  - a. The creative practice of rendering visible the total environment including all human and non-human actants of, and in, place.
  - b. The creative practice of rendering visible or performance as a result of specific special/placial intra-actions.
  - c. The recognition that local intra-action is both separated, and joined concurrently from the holicartographic whole.

These terms are being used to explore potential modes of decolonised and reinhabited creative practice and research. They remain largely ill-defined terms and are to be considered a protean (and always changing) taxonomy. These terms need to be seen as different in use than like terms, they are not mind-mapping or psychogeography. I mean for them to not always privilege the specific. They are likely to appear as rhizomatic and heterogeneous.

These terms will continue to be developed as my practice progresses.

## CONCLUSION

I maintain an ongoing practice inspired by attempts to reconcile my world. That of the interior and exterior (and to breakdown the sense that these are somehow separate) with my academic and domestic life (and to breakdown the sense that these are also somehow separate). These spheres continue to collide in exciting and haphazard ways, and I continue to respond to them with equally haphazard conduct. I present here only a small slice of the ongoing explorations and practice in a manner that is more anecdotal (and blog-ese) than evidenced. Nevertheless, it presents some interesting ways to assess practice-based humanities, and, one attempt at thinking through House, Home and the Australian Domestic Experience.

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