



Labour as compost: Reimagining the conditions and practices of *m_othering* Abbra Kotlarczyk

A tree is no longer just a tree, becomes more than itself in being rent, rendered less than itself in being chained, endlessly on the way to and from itself.

Fred Moten, 2018, *Readings in Contemporary Poetry*, Dia Art Foundation.

Preamble

In August of 2019 I co-curated the exhibition *m_othering the perceptual ars poetica*.¹ In the exhibition's catalogue essay I set in motion an imagined continuum, an entanglement, that saw one set of observations by the artist Zoe Leonard respond to those of the poet Sharon Olds:

Pink sky in the morning—a girl's sky.
Slowly the trees become visible. (Olds 2016, 22)

And then—

A locust tree turning colour. A bright sharp yellow against cerulean blue. The light at a morning angle. Strong. The yellow glows impossible against the blue, almost chalking in intensity. And it's there again the next day, and the next, and next. But a slightly imperceptible shift each day. And then a week later I see it's not really yellow any more.

Not fresh yellow. More of a soft warm light ochre.
And the leaves are sparse. (Leonard 2006)

The acuity of these two sets of observations in tandem, whilst evidenced by their discrete conditions of lambency, became an intuitive marker for my experiences of motherhood at that particular time.

That same week we installed the show saw a period of heightened community solidarity in support of the still (at the time of writing) ensuing blockade at the Djap Wurrung Embassy some 200km away, between Buangor and Ararat in Victoria. That these shouts of resistance were being made in defence of 800-year old sacred Indigenous birthing trees facing such brute destruction at the hands of the Victorian Government, in lieu of a controversial highway upgrade, was not lost on me. Given the cultural significance of these trees, together with the concerns of the exhibition—in its collectivising practices of care and expanded elocutions of parentage to extend to environmental and cultural milieu—I was forced to reflect upon the privilege of labouring within the institutional context of a public art gallery situated on stolen, unceded territory.

In the week following the opening of the show, I travelled to my childhood property of 35 acres nestled

amongst Gondwana rainforest in the hills behind Mullumbimby on Arakwal country in Northern NSW. It was very early September, our Spring, when for the first time in my life I experienced a pathogenic white smoke blanketing an otherwise temperate, green terrain. These were the very visible and preemptive signs of what we now know to have been Australia's most severe and unprecedented bushfire season both prior to, and since, colonisation.

I read back on the opening passages of that catalogue essay now and consider how I might have reframed my approach to the perceptions of motherhood, given what the immediate confluences around the show were. Not only in ecological terms do I reflect this, but in thinking about what a six-month period represents as far as the evolving ethical responsibilities we have in communicating our worldly entanglements with our youngest kin. My now cognisant daughter is starting to prod and poke at the contours of her domain inside the home, as a pathway to the world beyond it: 'Why do we have to save water?', 'Why can't I pull all the toilet paper off the roll and make cosy piles of it on the bathroom floor?' I see and hear her saying.

This essay reappraises those earlier observations in such a way that not only reflect its differing contextual parameters—apropos of Jahnne Pasco-White's expanded painting practice—but in relation to the temporal shifts of parentage that render the light more of a soft warm light ochre now, the trees necessarily more visible.

Lambency as Condition

To offer and receive care—whether human, animal, environmental, material, spiritual, political or otherwise—is to occupy a real and perceived territory that shifts, however imperceptibly, with each labouring turn. Lately I've been returning to the words of the poet Fred Moten (2018), situating the work of care in what he describes as 'an art of measured chant, calligraphic, post-crepuscular'. The temporal mode of the post-crepuscular that he locates—being after dusk and before dawn—is rich with associations of what it means to nurture, to look after and to support through various modes of parentage. In a literal sense, the infantile edge into darkness is the time of the witching hour when babies are their most restless; when parents attempt to find a continuity of sleep, and with it a sanity that mostly evades them (at least for a time). Once the babies grow and find their rhythms, night time becomes a space for reclaiming certain activities—a time when self-care might become possible again. As a metaphoric

device, Moten's post-crepuscular suggests, on multiple levels, what it means to dwell in a state of darkness that is simultaneously pregnant with the expectancy of what we know to be the sun's daily cyclical rise and fall. In the throws of caring for the young, the sick, the elderly, the self, recessive and precarious languages and cultures and the vulnerability of the environment that we inescapably pillage for our survival, we persevere on behalf of our visions of betterment and stability, often in pursuit of certain cornucopias. Naturally, the desperate clutchings of our fumbles in the dark feels like the right place to start to formulate a response to the messy and often invisible, but utterly necessary work of care.

My original thinking on the post-crepuscular led me to consider Rebecca Solnit's way of seeing in the dark. For her, darkness has long been a pejorative term associated with dark skin and with it the problematics of race relations. In her 2004 book *Hope in the Dark*, Solnit (2017) embarked on a project to rescue such notions of darkness; to ascribe to this place new potentials for erotic communion and possibility: darkness as the time when love is made, darkness as more a 'womb than a tomb'. While I still uphold the need for hope in dark times, the increasingly painful ecological events of recent times have led me to consider more acutely what the Theologian and spiritual activist Stephen Jenkinson (2015) calls for, which is grief as discernment, and not hope as future-oriented, as what we need to propel us into action *now*. This causes me to think about the kind of action that Hannah Arendt (1998, 12) theorised in her redressing of the Western tradition of *vita activa* (active life): that which is defined by our mortal lives, by our devotion to public-political matters; that which is distinct from, but entwined with, *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life). As Jenkinson urges, it is the necessary contemplation of our own mortality through practices of grief that drives us toward the action required to effectively converse with, and care for, those living systems gravely suffering around us.

Exclusions and Inclusions

The task of engaging in a process of editing (reducing) and reworking (expanding) this text—one produced hastily, in the dark, on the intimate contours of parentage from a queer world perspective—leads me to consider these lines from the exhibition text for Jahnne Pasco-White's (2019b) recent Gertrude Glasshouse exhibition *becoming with*: 'within the confines of a painting and drawing practice, the question of 'becoming-with' becomes not simply one of (re)presentation but of active exclusion

and inclusion'. As a series of actions, Pasco-White's works have always displayed the evidence of corporeal making, whether in the imbrication and dissolution of discrete areas of colour, or in the arc of the artist's arm scratching into the surface of paint or other materials onto roughly hewn canvas. More recently, these gestures have collaborated with a vast alchemy of organic materials—natural dyes, grasses, flowers, berries, olives, lichen, soil et al.—to extend the artist's impulse beyond the fixity of conservation-aspirations suggested by a prior use of more stable materials synonymous with Western art traditions.

Yet, where the trajectory of many artists, and in particular painters, so often moves toward a winnowing effect of emptying out—a shift towards a minimalism and even reductionism of one's own oeuvre—the opposite is true of Pasco-White's direction. Not only is this apparent in her move towards an accelerated inclusion of colour, form, material and layering, but in her ambitious scales and display formats there is a particular *crowding in* effect taking shape. This is evident in the artist's move away from the gallery walls and into a more embodied, somatic display format. All of this indicates a certain voraciousness for inclusion, where Pasco-White (Abdulrahim 2019) has made the point that she is more readily metabolising offcuts and refuse from within her own body of work. The healthy side effect to this kind of overt production of matter is, of course, a frugality that is in favour of less waste and more aggregation.

Such practices of exclusion and inclusion relate not only to the material parameters of artistic practice—or for that fact, to the continual laboured rotations upon which child-rearing is wholly dependent—but to the apparent tensions of access, participation and contiguity when it comes to who and what is brought into conversations and remediations of care. In *Making Kin Not Population*, Donna Haraway (Clarke & Haraway 2018, 31) calls for an '*elaborated vocabulary* for making kin and caring far beyond 'pro- and anti- and non-natalist,' that does *not* use the binary implying word 'choice'. In calling for a world that is pro-child and not simply pro-choice, Haraway urges us to acknowledge that the 'replenishing of stolen generations is absolutely vital for genuine reproductive justice'.

For many Indigenous communities, the term 'repatriation' is widely understood through the lens of restorative practices where ancestral remains and sacred cultural heritage items are returned to traditional owners and/or their descendants (White 2018). 'Rematriation', by extension, is a term being widely taken up by the women of Turtle Island, to further reinstate the otherwise patriarchal

contours of restorative justice work when it comes to the stewardship of mothers and women in a return to origins. In a speech written and presented at the opening night of the *m_othering* exhibition, artist and researcher Jen Rae (2019) articulated rematriation as 'a spiritual way of life that recenters respect and care for Mother Earth and kinship relationships between each other and all life forms. The climate emergency urgently calls upon us to reconcile our colonial histories and decentre dominant narratives of the patriarchy'.

In her reappraisal of Haraway's call for us to stay here, with the trouble, Deborah Bird Rose (Tsing, Swanson, Gan & Bubandt 2017, G55-56) makes a very specific prosodic insertion when she says that we need to 'stay with the *human* trouble'. In allowing herself to speak on behalf of other human and non-human species who suffer the violence of human-inflicted trouble, Bird Rose acknowledges that 'at the very least, we who have not yet been drawn into the vortex of violence are called to recognise it, name it, and resist it; we are called to bear witness and to offer care'. The 'yet' that Bird Rose includes in this sentence is important. Where there is an increasing awareness of how extensive the violence of human-wielded activity in the form of climate change is, Bird Rose names what many of us are feeling: that it may only be a matter of time until this violence directly impacts us all.

When speaking to the necessity for young flying foxes to be fed and touched regularly, Bird Rose (Tsing, Swanson, Gan & Bubandt 2017, G57) says that 'human intentionality infuses care practice; youngsters will die without tactile, vocal, socio-familial care'. As we well know, this is similarly the case with the young in most human and non-human species. Comparatively, it is my belief that creative practices—as dialogic modes in direct conversation with the intra-connectivity of our moral livelihoods—are also subject to lacking a certain luminosity in the absence of intra-worldly tactility, vocality and care.

The *m_othering* exhibition developed as the result of co-curator Antonia Sellbach and I reaching out during our first years of caring for our young children. In seeking lines of solidarity, Sellbach and I engaged a series of protracted, multi-platformed discussions which extended to other artists (parents and non-parents alike) in fleshing out the realities and potentials of care and creative practice. Aside from the experience of pregnancy, to which my relationship was one of an inside-outsider observing the intimate proportions of my partner's experience, I relate to much of what

Pasco-White’s (2019a) exhibition *messmates* led her to reflect in her own experience of becoming a mother:

For me [...] the experience of pregnancy, childbirth and mothering forged new networks of kinship, and demanded that I took notice of others with whom I was already co-constituted. Enabling a life that I can see, touch, smell and hear explicated the bare fact that I had always *shared* my body with countless messmates. My life’s companions. Making a baby was a co-production of kith and kin, both external and internal, of give and take. Making kin, I see now, is an unfolding process of becoming with my young *and* myriad messmates.

The acuity of Pasco-White’s ‘taking notice’ of the implicit co-constitution and co-production that the enabling of a life requires, articulates well the basis of a decentred methodology that has become my own familial and aesthetic structuring. My relationship to co-constitution and co-production is one that requires, at minimum, a collaboration in the formation of my beyond-nuclear family, which results in something of what Pasco-White (2019a) situates in Haraway’s goal of the difficult task of making kin: ‘[it] should be activated across blood ties as well as be intergenerational, not confined to any prescribed limits of the nuclear family’.

Lambency as Praxis

A less frequented use of the term lambency is that which derives from the Latin verb *lambere*: the act or quality of licking. Where John Berger (Alarcón et al. 2019, 201) has said that ‘birth begins the process of learning to be separate’, for the non-birth mother, learning to separate from the baby is simultaneously about finding ways to come closer together in the absence of an initial bodily entanglement. In an artwork statement from 2019, I wrote about how my young daughter started rubbing her spit on my body—a mimetic act which later became clear was inspired by the licking and grooming depicted in *The Lion King*. While the physical act of a child intentionally rubbing their spit on you can be unsettling, with the impulse being to separate even further, I stopped pulling away and began to frame her rubbings as a radical act of care that enabled her distinct DNA traces to commingle with my own. Of this sort of salivary praxis, Haraway (2016, 93) reflects on her own entanglements with her dog Ms. Cayenne Pepper who ‘continues to colonize all my cells—a sure case of what the biologist Lynn Margulis calls symbiogenesis. I bet if you checked

our DNA, you’d find some potent transfections between us. Her saliva must have the viral vectors’.

There is, in this, an apparent connective tissue to be traced between lambency as *condition*—the various shifts of light, time and space required for kin-making—and lambency as a symbiotic *praxis* of *becoming with*. In suggesting practices of licking as well as consuming, metabolising and composting, Pasco-White’s recent incorporation of edibles such as avocado skins, lilly-pilly berries, carrots, turmeric et al. has the effect of lambency as both entanglement, and a quality redolent of the Aboriginal aesthetic of ‘shimmer’. While I’m mindful to not too heavily conflate two sets of painting practices that derive from vastly different traditions—one from within a Western canon of abstract painting, the other from a distinctly Indigenous worldview—it is worth considering how the developments of Pasco-White’s incorporation of organic materials can be read through an evolutionary process akin to the layered aesthetic function of shimmer. In her discussion of the Yolngu term *bir’yun*—which translates to “brilliant” or “shimmering”—Bird Rose (Tsing, Swanson, Gan & Bubandt 2017, G53) cites the anthropologist Howard Morphy’s work in describing the Yolngu painting process as a preliminary ‘rough blocking out of shapes’ which then shifts to a finer detailing of ‘fine-grain crosshatching’. While not solely defined to painting practices, but considered a worldly aesthetic that permeates across vast forms of expression, this transference from what Western audiences would appreciate as a “ground” to “figure” relationship, is what Yolngu people describe as the transmogrification of “dull” into “brilliant”. The particular aesthetic function of shimmer is further described by Morphy (1989, 22), wherein ‘an object may be aesthetically pleasing in order to draw a person’s attention to it so that some other function may be fulfilled or other message communicated’. Where Bird Rose (Tsing, Swanson, Gan & Bubandt 2017, G52-55) explains that the term *bir’yun* ‘does not distinguish between domains of nature and culture’ but is ‘characteristic of a lively pulsating world, not a mechanistic one’, her hope is that through encounters with shimmer, we may be better placed to be enticed by, thus more attuned to notice and care for, other entities around us who are in strife.

Ending as Rotation

Jenkinson (2015) makes the point that there is no other species on earth for whose survival and flourishing human existence is required; that every other life force—whether elemental, vegetal, mineral, bacterial or otherwise—

exists in a constant cycle of caring and providing for us as human beings. Where Pasco-White (n.d.) reiterates that ‘ecological thinking is of contemporary urgency yet has ancient origins’, we are now at the point as a planetary species where we can feel, on a daily basis, the apparent signs of the care we receive becoming stretched, depleted and, increasingly so, violently non-compliant.

Artistic practices that strive to diffuse the (false) meritocracy of human actors promoted as primary agents within a worldly hierarchy—that is, practices that let *various* kinds of others in—strikes me as essentially queer practices (at least insofar as what the politicised lexicon of queer has come to mean). Out of all of this labour, out of all of this care in entangling our bodies with others, I propose a retort to Judith Butler’s (2005, 136) call: that ‘to be undone by another is a primary necessity’ of living a moral and ethical life, when ‘our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human [...] If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven’.

Endnotes

ⁱ An earlier version of this essay accompanied the exhibition *m_othering the perceptual ars poetica* curated by Abbra Kotlareczyk and Antonia Sellbach, Counihan Gallery, Brunswick, Victoria, August 30–September 29, 2019.

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