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.


**Preamble**

In August of 2019 I co-curated the exhibition *m_othering the perceptual ars poetica*. 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 I had 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—those of the 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’. Lambency, as a condition, 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 her first major solo exhibition, artist and researcher Jen Rae (2019) articulated restaturation 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 decouple 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-G56) 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 spirit time before it is too late.

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; youngers 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 of direct conversation in the interconnectivity 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 explicates the bare fact that I had always *shared* my body with countless messmates. My life’s companionships. 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 of the difficult task of making kin: [It] should be activated across blood ties as well as being 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 pasco-white’s (2019a) situates in Haraway’s of the difficult task of making kin: [It] should be activated across blood ties as well as being intergenerational, not confined to any prescribed limits of the nuclear family.

There is, in this, an apparent connective tissue to be traced between lambency as co-production—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 ecologizing 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 politiced 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 return 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’.

References


Jahnne Pasco-White: Kin
Published by Art Ink and Unlikely Publishing, in Melbourne, Australia
artink.com.au
unlikely.net.au

Unlikely Publishing is supported by The Centre of Visual Art (CoVA) at The University of Melbourne

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Editor: N.A.J. Taylor
Design: Hayman Design
Copyeditor: J.M.L. Taylor

Jahnne Pasco-White is represented by STATION, Australia

Jahnne Pasco-White acknowledges the following organisations for sponsoring the project at various junctures: Australian Council for the Arts, Marion Bequest for Painting, Gertrude Contemporary, Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Mora Dyring Memorial Studio Fellowship, Bendigo Art Gallery’s Arthur Guy Memorial Painting Prize, Yarra City Council, Moreland City Council, Regional Arts Victoria, Monash University and the Australian Federal Government’s Department of Education, Skills and Employment. Several individuals, identified by the tremendously supportive staff at my gallery STATION, acquired works that enabled printing the book in hardcover. Jahnne is especially grateful to her partner Nico for his unwavering commitment to her practice and to this book, and their daughter, Oslo, whose entry into their lives gave rise to this body of work in the first place. The project’s ultimate shape and form benefited from being intimately nurtured by family, peers and friends, as well as intellectually nourished by the dozen authors who dedicated time and energy to write such thoughtful chapters.

N.A.J. Taylor is greatly indebted to each of the contributors to this volume—and the peer reviewers—for meeting every editorial demand made of them during an extraordinarily difficult 18-month period, both individually and collectively. One of the joys of editing this book has been to document the grace and grit of his partner Jahnne as an artist, whilst observing these same qualities being developed in her mothering of Oslo. His own mother, Jan, deserves special praise for her editorial assistance. He would also like to acknowledge Simon Hayman and Samantha Lynch at Hayman Design and the team at Art Ink, as well as Norie Neumark and Jan Hendrik Bruggemeier at Unlikely: Journal for Creative Arts, for agreeing to co-publish this volume.

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Distribution: Art Ink, Australia
First Edition of 750
ISBN: 978-0-6450166-0-4
Printed by Gunn & Taylor, Australia
Paper: Ecostar+ 100% Recycled Uncoated, 120gsm, 250gsm
Stephen Clay, 120gsm, 250 gsm