

Plant/Human Borderland Jamming

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ABSTRACT

Artists and scholars alike are turning to plants as key allies in our attempts to go beyond colonial modes of engaging with the environment through extraction, control, categorization and the human-centric discourse of Anthropocene thinking. This paper will adopt the methods of “critical plant thinking” and “multispecies ethnography” to investigate creative modes of telling “lively stories” about two particular species of plants made nomadic during colonial seed scattering – Bitou Bush (*Chrysanthemoides monilifera*) and Aloe (*Aloe ferox*). Both plants moved through botanical/colonial conquest from South Africa to Australia for ornamental reasons, yet have become a vilified weed and economically promising respectively. Turning to embodied and humble practices of composting, foraging, crafting and care, this article feels through recent practices of tactical and food based art, combining theory with ethnographic narrative that details the making of actual jam with two plant protagonists. Developing the concepts of “multispecies jamming” and “DIY violence,” this paper grapples with the presumption that difference translates to ontological separation, and ultimately asks for a valuing of plants beyond human use, opening ourselves up to embodied, vulnerable ways of ingesting stories and cross species relationships. How do practices of grounded care intersect with violence in ways that may develop tools and methods to *compost* the Anthropocene with plants front of mind? How might this help us to unseal ourselves from complexity and separation in times of mass extinction and destruction?

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene, plants, postcolonialism, food art, multispecies.

Textbook diagrams ... are simplistic renderings of that utterly magical, totally cosmic alchemical process (of photosynthesis) that tethers earthly plant life in reverent, rhythmic attention to the earth's solar source.... Lapping up sunlight, inhaling carbon dioxide, drinking in water, and releasing oxygen, they literally make the world. Pulling matter out of thin air, they teach us the most nuanced lessons about mattering and what really matters.

Natasha Myers (“Photosynthesis”)

This article is framed by disrupting and hacking outdated discourses of wilderness, classification and dualistic divisions between native and invasive. It aims to allow a space for imaginative and more ethical human/plant futures, carving out new space for hope and connection in a time of extinction and loss through a story of two particular plants. Traversing from the initial sites of colonisation in South Africa, the Cape of Good Hope, to the first sites of colonisation in Australia, the New South Wales coast, these two particular plants were brought to Australia for ornamental purposes. But “bitou bush” (*Chrysanthemoides monilifera*) (Figure 1) and aloe (*Aloe ferox*) (Figure 2) have become much more than just an aesthetic botanical background in surprising ways. Bitou has become a vilified noxious “weed,” *ferox* medicinally and economically useful and accepted. I found that for these two plant protagonists, the borderlands of systems of valuing have shifted over time and remain in a state of flux. In an attempt to unsettle borders engrained by lingering colonial histories of classification, I argue that by focusing on these particular plant histories and their wider cultural contexts, we might re-write plants as key actors with agential capabilities, helping to shape history and culture using vastly different sensory dexterities. Adopting emergent practices of urban foraging by borrowing berries from unruly bitou growing along the NSW coast and carefully slicing a leaf from an aloe growing in an urban public garden, I develop a practice of “multispecies jamming” where actual jam is crafted. Unpacking recent artistic considerations of foodways and an emerging culture of DIY practices, I investigate how creative strategies to engage with plants might chart new ethical, political and social spaces for reflection and co-flourishing. Through an engagement with haptic, embodied forms of knowledge and sharing, I invited fellow humans to ingest these possibilities, both bitter and sweet flesh. Developing participative modes of “*DIY violence*” may assist in making complexity, entanglement, preservation and harm visible in tangible and new ways. By becoming bodily with precarity, we may digest at least some fragmentary possibilities at the edge of sensory borderlands, gradually breaking down the stagnant, absolute, dualistic borders that have been so harmful to us all. This article aims to investigate how emerging creative forms of relating to plants through embodied care *as well* as violence may open up spaces for more-than-Anthropocene thinking and making. How do we *compost and compose* the Anthropocene, letting processes of uncertainty and decay interfere with our colonial conditioning and subsequent valuing systems centered on categorization, control, capitalism, and anthropocentrism? To this end I will detail some recent discussions surrounding tactical and food based art, as well as practices of foraging and

crafting with plants; acts of care that are intertwined with metamorphic flows of life and death and subsequent violence. Fieldwork interludes detail the body-to-body *process* of foraging, making and sharing the jam. In concluding, I discuss how these micro practices of foraging and “*DIY violence*” may help us to ingest the memories, connections, ethics and possibilities in times of precarity and preservation: to make and share jam as a way to literally taste ideas and stories.

The emerging field of “critical plant studies” brings unprecedented attention to the agency of floral life forms, where according to Anna Tsing “human nature is an interspecies relationship” (Tsing, “Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species” 142), comprised of webs of dependence that are constantly shifting. With an acknowledgement of plants as key agents in these webs, just as earth is often referred to as the “blue planet,” we live amongst a green ocean of overlooked companions. As a starting point, I situate my self within “contact zones” (Pratt), taking plant life as a looking glass into thinking more deeply about a world beyond “human exceptionalism.” Human exceptionalism refers to the Western tradition of perceiving humans to be at the center of a hierarchical ordering, more intelligent and important than fellow creatures (Plumwood). What Matthew Hall calls “plant blindness” might be considered a common side effect of human exceptionalism, where plants are largely ignored, rendered as a backdrop for more “legitimate” life forms. Rethinking our world in terms of contact zones is an appeal for us to go beyond *illusions of separation* to accept that encounters are sites of change, constantly shifting. They offer a framework for understanding encounters – both violent and caring, as more complex and multilayered than they are typically perceived to be. This kind of “becoming-with” other species – beyond capital, classification and hierarchies – is more of a “dance of relating” for Donna Haraway, where “if we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism ... then we know that becoming is always becoming with – in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake” (Haraway, “When Species Meet” 244).

Haraway insists that a connecting of this divide and an unravelling of human exceptionalism requires a reframing through the notion of “naturecultures,” multilayered relations of “significant otherness” (Haraway, “When Species Meet” 24). By teasing open the potential for humans and botanical companions – both those deemed to be useful and weedy – we may find ways of “getting on together with some grace” (Haraway, “When Species Meet” 2-4). Departing from reductionist nature/culture dichotomies, it is the aim of this experiment to adopt the inter-disciplinary approach of “multispecies ethnography,” which seeks to disrupt dominant modes of ontological division. Plants are lifted out of the margins of anthropology and begin to “appear alongside humans in the realm of *bios* with legibly biographical and political lives” (Kirksey and Helmreich 545). Following Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, telling “lively stories” (Rose and van Dooren) brings fresh eyes to examine how values and priorities are being enacted in various locations. Rose urges for a shift to “living generously with others, singing up relationships so that we all flourish” (Rose 59) through stories and fieldwork that are better able to engage a wider audience. By

combining elements of philosophy and ethnography into narrative and theoretical frameworks we might unsettle dominant human centered modes of storying, to tell tales that gather up all the complexities, but stay open enough for contingent ways to make kin, towards possibilities of “collaborative survival” (Tsing, “The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins” 23) in times of capitalist ruins. By challenging our valuing systems and colonial tendencies to classify, we may open ourselves to different ways of life, dimensions of thought and sensory and social dexterities. It seems imperative, then, that we turn to beings on the margins of human value and care. Plants are often excluded from discussions surrounding ethics and yet supply us with almost everything that gives us life – from air to food. We should actively see plants as amazing, yet we also rely on harm being done to plants for our survival. How can we look at this violence and harm front on, and “do” our simultaneously harmful and caring relationships with plants in the best way we possibly can? How can embodied art practices and sensory, edible “borderland jams” help us play and feel out these ethical boundaries – re-evaluating, decommodifying and even decolonising plant/human relationships?

Fig. 1 “Bitou bush” growing along the NSW coast near Kurnell, 2016. Photo by author.



Fig. 2 Aloe Ferox growing in Pretoria National Botanical Garden, South Africa, 2016. Photo by author.



It is an overcast Autumn day, and an Aloe ferox suddenly jumps out at me in a sidewalk garden in Sydney, my eyes now calibrated to notice its particular shades of sage green, sunset orange, dusty reds. Returning with a large knife the following day, my heart races as I look around the street ensuring no one is watching. It's hard to hold on to the leaf while I begin cutting, the spikes digging deep into my hands. Eventually I awkwardly back through the bottom of the leaf, a cut far less clean than I had hoped. A shiny open wound remains, the clear gel glowing against the background palette of dull greens. The yellow bitters begin oozing out quickly, dripping onto my hands, extremely sticky and with a pungent, strange smell. I suddenly feel a guilt and concern for the plant wash over me. I lick my hand as a sort of spontaneous form of self-punishment, immediately convulsing with the shockingly bitter taste. It reminds me of a bitter substance my mother would give me to paint on my nails to prevent me from biting them nervously, which I later learned may have in fact been ferox bitters. I place the heavy leaf in my backpack, weighing on my shoulders, and leave the scene. Returning a couple of weeks later, I'm relieved to see that the plant had healed itself, the wound closed up and deadened at the end.

As bitou thrives in disturbed coastal environments, I found large clusters of it growing around the small industrial town of Kurnell, on the outskirts of Sydney. Kurnell is where Captain Cook first landed in 1770 and Cook's botanists, Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander first encountered Australia's plants here, their first visit to Kurnell lasting eight days during which they mostly collected specimens to take back to England. It is also, importantly, the site of first contact between would-be colonisers and Aboriginal peoples, specifically the Goorowal and Gweagal Nations. Now home to a Caltex oil refinery and a

controversial desalination plant, I found lively bitou communities along the rocky coastline, where its thick branches seemed to house birds, lizards, rats and snakes. Contrasting this diversity, small streams of oil glistened over the rocks and flowed towards the ocean. Foraging the bitou berries felt far less violent than cutting the ferox leaf, gently freeing the plump black berries from their clusters, leaning awkwardly into the bushes to reach them and trying not to fall into the thick of it. I did acknowledge though, that I was robbing birds and other creatures at a time when the berries were scarce. At the same time, perhaps this removal of berries could be seen as a care for the larger landscape, a tiny reduction in weedy seeds left to germinate.

A growing cohort of scholars from across the academy have adopted the term “Anthropocene” (Crutzen and Stoermer) to refer to the increasingly significant role that humanity is playing in the shaping of planetary environments, contributing to the “sixth mass extinction.” While humans and particularly the colonial project have caused irreversible and incomprehensible loss and destruction, it is also important to recognize that humans can never act alone, that other species also “make history” (Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin” 159). Natasha Myers calls for an acknowledgment of the “Planthropocene” in order to unsettle the centralization of humans, to recognize that “green beings” fundamentally make the planet livable, that “all cultures and political economies, local and global, turn around plants’ metabolic rhythms” (Myers). So as we mourn vast losses and feel our way through precarious times and ruinous environments, how do we go beyond Anthropocentric thinking and its apocalyptic, human focused narratives to include plants in radical new ways?

Departing from ethnography being viewed as the art of *writing culture*, the turn to the arts of multispecies ethnographers may be seen more broadly as *making culture* where artists assist in actively reconfiguring the “entangled webs we weave with other beings” (Kirksey, Costelloe-Kuehn and Sagan 211). In order to work towards collaborative survival, while also acknowledging the harm that our existence and reliance on plants causes to the individual plants we are becoming so attuned to, it seems that creative art practices may open up spaces for play and experimentation where our perceptions may become more malleable. Creative interventions to think through and question our entanglements with others may embody what Suzi Gablik refers to as “connective aesthetics” that seek to push past apocalyptic narratives and framings of the environment to become intimate with alternative futures. Though individual plants may not be reciprocated in the practices of removing a *ferox* limb or picking bitou berries, it is my hope that the practice of *making* may open up fresh dialogue to consider the complexity and mystery of plants’ ways of life, to cultivate respect and value beyond large scale human consumption and corporate food systems. This endeavour does not aim to speak on behalf of plants, nor does it seek to enlist them in artistic concepts purely as material for human ideas to be read on to. Instead, however imperfectly, we might feel out the possibilities of “embodied communication” (Despret) to invite *correspondence* through bodily and artistic encounter, feeling our way through. By hacking the Anthropocene and anthropocentric thinking in this way, Western human-centered modes of

valuing and relating to our fellow earthlings, climate and environment are challenged. One embodied and tangible way to approach this junction is by examining the haptic relationships we have with plants via the foodways in which we are inevitably implicated. What are our emerging earthly accountabilities within the various cultures of food systems, supply chains and corporate powers? Tasting the Anthropocene, opening up queer and contingent ways to explore alternative futures ensures there are no easy answers, and we must go forth with hands and tongues noninnocently ready for surprising new pathways and ways of relating to plants, including uncomfortable or unfamiliar tastes and combinations of flavors that refuse to fit into familiar categories.

Ferox has properties similar to the well-known *Aloe vera*, with soothing edible gel inside its thick spikey leaves, yet yellow bitters also ooze from the outer edges of the leaves, which is also considered medicinal. Bitou has small clumps of black berries, that while not particularly fleshy, are also edible. To jam also makes a musical analogy. We live in a world full of “discordant harmonies” (Botkin), engaged in ongoing processes of “composing” (Latour), listening out for polyphonic rhythms (Tsing, “The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins” 24). To jam the story here is to recognise that we are always “jamming” with significant others. Rather than illusions of harmony, we may liken the “music” we make with ontologically different others to “free jazz” that invites *improvisation*, is multidimensional, oscillating, wild, and also full of sounds and rhythms unperceivable to the human ear. A further reading of “jam” is to jam a machine. I am reminded of Charlie Chaplin’s film *Modern Times* (1936) where he continues to become stuck inside giant machines, clogging them with his body. The “Anthropological Machine” refers to the machine that governs our perception of what constitutes the divide between human and other-than-human, the making and remaking of others (human or otherwise) as categorically different (Oliver).

While radically ontologically different, it is necessary to pay close attention to the possibilities of a correspondence, even a shared *alliance* with these plants through modest plans to forage berries and leafy limbs for jamming. Pomo people in Northern California have recently revived an ancient, intimate connection with oak trees through the foraging of acorns and the crafting of bitter edible “acorn mush.” By nurturing this connection, they have uncovered a “gratitude to oaks and a shared history, a mutual dependence.” Oaks and their bitter medicine are viewed as an “alliance [representing] a shared political resistance during the colonial era” (Noel et al. 159). This alliance and “singing up” of their connection to oaks has played a part in healing for Pomo people, and possibly for oaks. We may adopt their call for a “freshly cultured landscape,” that makes *space* for de commodified approaches to food and for possible alliances between humans and plants. These practices are aligned with *tactical microbiopolitics* that aim to “displace dominant regimes for managing life... [becoming an] aid for cultivating livable and livelier worlds” (Paxton 121), an art of reworlding that focuses on the micro and the local, examining how meaning and matter are created beyond standard practices. Creative strategies that are not sterile or removed but rather vulnerable, bodily, deeply involved, feeling out what might come

next with a focused awareness of our reliance on plant life, might be referred to as a form of “responsible terraformation” in a new generation of makers and tinkerers (Papadopoulos). Within the understanding that there is no turning back to the pristine environment (if it ever existed), we may *make* life with beings and materials in terraformed, disturbed environments. This type of making is grounded in non-anthropocentric, more-than-human-composed stories, open to infection, listening for possible translations, *composting* all the way by playing with new mixtures of social, biotic and inorganic materials. Using composting and other more-than-human-controlled processes may guide us in hacking, redesigning, weaving with justice and abundance for as many creatures as possible front of mind. Processes of composting speak to a need to abandon obsessions with definitive answers and solutions, which in the context of Australian post-colonial environments, is a remnant of colonial thought processes and notions of control over our environment. In particular, bitou challenges the lingering notion of human control over the land. First introduced as an ornamental plant in the early 1900s, it was then enlisted to stabilize mined sand dunes and was actively planted along the coast of NSW. Bitou “had its own plan” however, and is now considered one of Australia’s worst noxious weeds. Composting with bitou, despite rigorous and violent ongoing attempts at extermination, is an opportunity to be open to change, to allow what we think we know to decay and transform into new ways of relating and collaborating, locally, with the plants we live with and whose air we breath.

In considering the rich possibilities of urban foraging as an embodied, local, and tactical way of engaging in plant human connections and local cycles of matter and meaning, I sign myself up for an “urban foraging tour” in Sydney with self proclaimed “weedy one” and artist Diego Bonetto. He advocates for a deep respect for the plants that sprout up around us through companionship and embodied forms of teaching the “arts of inclusion” (Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom”), asking us to radically re-assess and re-value plants, and to bring new attention and vitality to urban nature publics as sites of potential transformative encounters. This kind of attention and interference with what is here surrounding us, a rambunctious weedy garden that tells many tales of our failure to control “nature,” attends to a certain type of grounded care. Turning to the ground, literally “*hands on dirt*” in this way speaks to the notion of ethical doings and every day, unexceptional ways of caring and relating that build upon personal practices and ethical obligations and engagements (Bellacasa). Urban foraging begins with an active and collective noticing, engaging in the world of the plants that are here sprouting up all around us, regardless of whether they are obedient to a particular, desirable line-up of native, valuable or beautiful species. Foraging for food and materials as a way to re-educate ourselves about our under-noticed plant companions is one embodied way of participating in this type of humble, grounded, everyday care. When our hands, our mouths, our organs are participating in embodied acts of caring, we also make ourselves vulnerable and involved in the practice of “becoming with,” in scratches, stings, indigestion, or nourishment, in new ways of making life together.

It is a warm Autumn morning and a group of curious humans have gathered along the urban Cooks River in Sydney's inner west to be greeted by a cheerful moustached Italian who stands up straight, with his woven foraging basket on arm and, after an acknowledgment of country, pronounces "Rule number one: be kind to the colony, don't over harvest even the weediest looking plants – only-take-what-you-need!" Striding ahead, Diego brings our attention quickly down from the human level to what is going on beneath us, a weedy tapestry in a ravaged urban corridor along a river that until recently was extremely polluted. I am surprised by the sheer diversity of plants useful to humans, edible as well as medicinal or useful for things like weaving. How have I never noticed so many of these plants? While a couple of people in the group are interested in survival – what they may need to eat should things get apocalyptic on earth – the majority are part of a recent culinary movement to eat local, both weeds and native plants, to be creative and adaptive with what can be found around the neighbourhood, to be "sustainable" and self-sufficient. There also seems to be an overall curiosity and wonder about the myriad of mysteries in the world of weeds and plants. "This is our botanical reality. It is what it is, disturbed," says Diego. Growing up he was sent out to pick dandelion leaves and roots by his mother in Italy, who would prepare them to eat. Utilizing our playfulness, Diego explains "we have been blowing their clocks for so long they are now on every continent." Not eating these plants that "grow out of concrete," or worse yet ripping them out or poisoning them ("that's just post-colonial guilt" he says), is deeply disrespectful according to Diego. We must collaborate with what is around us, rather than import food that has been sprayed with chemicals and bred to specific western tastes. Breeding out bitterness, he says, has limited our phytonutrient intake, and altered our tastes and desires. "Try this one, it's quite a landscape in your mouth!" he says, handing out common weeds such as "farmers friend," people now placing leaves in their mouths freely and without hesitance. "I used to hate this plant so much!" says one person, who usually endlessly battles with it in her garden. "Bless them," he says at one point. "Look at this majestic weed over here!" Diego's affectionate language displays a love for weedy plants that is not void of violence, as he carefully pulls them out, holding the roots softly. Little chunks of black soil fly around as he gesticulates expressively. "Smell it, touch it, empower yourself," he says. Diego advocates for an end to "arrogance" and a return to a collaborative, co-evolving life with plants. This is something we once knew, something we must remember, he repeats throughout the tour. The knowledge Diego advocates for is a remembering and sharing process, re-assembling past connections through walking, noticing, tasting and sharing stories, a recalling that asks us to radically question and abandon dominant modes of perceiving the most insignificant plants underfoot and all around us, inviting them into our bodies. This is an "embodiment of knowledge," he says. He explains that in order to forage safely, we must think in a way that is place situated, returning over time to engage, notice changes, get to know a place and its inhabitants intimately.

These gritty life and death kinds of art/plant/human collaborations might go some way to unsettling deep systems of control over plant life forms. As Diego pointed out (and as he learned from many Aboriginal teachers), many plants *require* them to be used, plucked from, and in a way harmed for their growth. In this sense harm and care can be intertwined. But instead of taking needlessly, there must be an awareness of this exchange – the harm must be accompanied by the care. Plants are not here *for us*, they are here *with us*, as collaborators, life givers, companions in a community. Beyond human uses, we may cultivate a respect for the role and agency of "unbidden flora" (Pellegrini and Baudry), where some plants do not fit into categories of wild

or cultivated. Here they perform their *own* makings on the streets adhering to natural cycles of decay and renewal; systems of co-production beyond humans' capacities to simply create green spaces. How may we *make with* while also allowing the spontaneity and self-expressions of plant life? Plant thinker Michael Marder suggests that a continued focus on plantation, monoculture, or other monetized forms of value is one of the greatest forms of violence facing plants, and that attempts to decommodify vegetal life through ethical eating may "form a rhizome with it ... turning oneself into a passage for the other without violating or dominating it" (185). While eating is still unavoidably an act of dominance over plants, death for one's own nourishment is seen as a departure from needless and thoughtless harm and killing; rather than the mindless act of "making killable" (Haraway, "When Species Meet" 80), it recognizes that eating without death is not possible, and that responsibility is key in learning to eat *well*. To situate the act of gathering, crafting and eating in a creative setting or gallery space may encourage a more reflective process of crafting and ingesting plant bodies. We might question the act of taking, consuming, discarding plants in corporate and colonial ways. It is important also to note that foraging and local, grounded ways of consuming plants is also ethically questionable in another way due to questions of *consent*, in recognition that taking at all is always taking from Aboriginal country, embedded in histories where plants and humans have shared decades of colonial violence.

We may depart from mass produced, processed food where sustenance becomes robotic, arriving on plates from faraway lands often radically less utopic than the photo on the packet. This void erases a very basic form of intimacy with our most vital providers of life. To "eat well" is to consider the complexity and webs of interdependence and subsequent responsibility we are enmeshed in with plants, animals, technologies, economies and cultures (Derrida). A culture of DIY practices has emerged in resistance to dystopian notions of food, where food becomes "physical and semiotic material" (Kelley 5) through spaces opened up by the feminist art movement. Beyond labours of care that can be depleting and consuming, associated with the marginalized female carer, the kitchen is reframed as "a site of knowledge production" (Kelley 2). In this way, we may reconfigure how we make and eat to engage in the complexity of our bodily entanglements with other life forms. Overall, I am drawn to the possibilities posed by Lindsay Kelley, the "multisensory reception of food and art ... [and] the hijacking of corporate design as an aesthetic of resistance" (Kelley 12). Though it is not within the scope of this paper to more broadly discuss the expanding arena of taste anthropology and taste studies, it might be appropriate to question the basis of our biocultural decisions to classify something as edible and palatable. Current trends in sustainability and eating locally in creative and experimental ways have opened space to ask a fundamental question – *what is food?* (Guthman). These emerging evolutions in taste and taste adventure ultimately unveil, I believe, a desire to connect more deeply to the life that sustains us, to have material connection, to taste our strange position as we step off previously hard lines between nature and culture into unknown territory. Through foraging, we also taste place. We taste the survival of the soil in ravaged urban corridors, the smoggy residues of nearby roads and waterways, and pesticides. We taste risk, assassination, assimilation and

attempted control, as well as plant and human survival, a continuation to produce phytonutrients through histories of colonial and ongoing violence and disregard.

While the aim may be to disrupt dominant food ways and make way for more connective, livable futures, these bodily modes of engagement are not always comfortable and invite involuntary responses such as indigestion. Non-innocently we acknowledge that there is no “final peace” in eating well, but that a nourishing of indigestion itself may hold space to consider that “in eating we are most inside the differential rationalities that make us who and what we are and that materialize what we must do if response and regard are to have any meaning personally and politically” (Haraway, “When Species Meet” 295). Smooshing together foraged parts of loved and hated, beautiful and weedy South African plants and inviting them into our bodies, blood and organs in the form of conceptual and literal jam, is both personal and political in intimate and involved ways.

To consider the act of jam making as personal and political, we may firstly turn to the history of jam as a process and an act of preserving. The jam jar as an object speaks to colonial first contact with the landscape, where impulses to preserve emerged from strategies for survival as well as the preservation of “civilized” foods. The process of heating and pouring the jam into jars while at a high temperature seeks to protect it from contamination and *seal* it off. Sterilization of the jars is standard practice before the jam is poured in, and it is then often bound tightly with string. Making sanitary here was not just culinary, but cultural: an object that speaks of colonial cultural preservation and sealing oneself off from a landscape and culture that was seen to be impoverished. This is ripe terrain for thinking through the various ways we continue to seal ourselves off in our day-to-day lives. Just think of most people’s unwillingness to engage in composting of their own organic waste, perceiving it as unsanitary, messy, crawling with critters and bacteria they know little about but automatically view as dirty, stinky and uncontrollable.

Pulling in a somewhat different direction, however, the act of making jam also involved the sharing of recipes and community knowledge, now understood as part of DIY culture and arts that promotes alternative food ways and agency, empowering people to become involved in the processes that nourish themselves and others. Additionally, sharing recipes has long been a mode of resistance for some Indigenous groups during colonization (Esquibel and Calvo). Emerging and novel ways to make jam requires engagement and participation, forging a way for new ethics about food and consumption. The art project “Making time: travelling preserves” also points out that making and sharing preserves in mobile gallery-situated kitchens speaks of notions of time. While refrigeration has diminished our knowledge and practices of preserving and social learning, “eradicat(ing) the multisensory indices of time – smell, taste, and tactility” (Lopes), preservation opens up a different perspective of time, a laboring process of picking, washing, heating, pouring, exchanging. A slower, closer-to-plant time.

Making futures together requires us to open up collaboratively to what is here, what is around us. But rather than this be a focus on human experience, nourishment and re-culturing, it is also a way to re-evaluate our relationships with plants and their complex roles in the world. Rather than being merely an *ingredient* in a recipe, I argue that to take this adaptation of jam crafting further requires an attention to the *lives* of the plant beings, encouraging care for other-than-humans *as well* as individual and community autonomy. Remembering the rhythms of jamming means remembering our entanglements with plants, as companions and collaborators. By hacking colonial processes of jam making, what was previously a process of preservation and control becomes *unsealed and unbounded*, open, messy and contaminated.

*After having foraged the plants, home in my kitchen, I began scrolling through various jam recipes online. I had to improvise here, as clearly there were no recipes that detail my particular plant collaborators (ingredients). Slicing the spiky skin away from the ferox leaf, I made sure to leave some of the yellow bitters in the hope that the bitterness would be detectable in the jam. The bitou berries sort of explode when breaking them apart, the seed taking up more space than flesh. In order to “flesh out” the jam, I decided to walk my neighborhood in Sydney’s inner west to gather some lilly pillys, a plump dusty pink berry with a fairly neutral, tart, peppery taste. They are literally raining through the streets at this time, an easily foragable berry, and a native tree (*Syzygium smithii*) popular due to a growing interest in “indigenous” foods. Interestingly lilly pilly was one of the first Aboriginal plant foods to be used by colonizers, yet it was “assimilated” in the sense that it was prepared in very English ways – as jam and “lillypilly jelly” (Newling). With these three plant parts, some organic sugar, and juiced lemon, I began a typical process of boiling and stirring berries and chopped up ferox gel. In order to combine them properly, I used a blender towards the end and was left with a thick, pale pink, fleshy, shiny jam. Dipping a spoon in, the first taste was surprising. The sweetness was subtle, and the bitterness was present, noticeable but not overwhelming. It was neither tasty nor revolting, it was hard to define. It felt contradictory to follow up with the typical sterilizing and sealing process, so I left it out for a while, sitting there on the bench. I eventually placed it in a bowl to refrigerate overnight before sharing it the following day.*

The next afternoon, I travelled with the jam to a community art space in Redfern to set up an impromptu installation to share the jam and its stories with people. I brought along a large board and some water crackers. I wanted to see what it would be like to share the jam openly, unsealed, messily, open to pathogens, microscopic floating matter such as dead leaves, dust, insect wings, skin. Placing the jam inside an icing tube allowed me to “paint” in a way, intuitively creating squiggly fragments that may have resembled snapshots of borderlines. People moved into the space to see an empty jar next to the jam installation, as if the jam had escaped. Wanting people to simply eat without any assumptions, I let people respond first through taste. People were hesitant at first to disrupt the lines, trying to dip into it in a way that didn’t mess it up. The responses to the taste were mixed. There was a lot of frowning combined with head nodding. “Hmmm...” People were unsure what they thought of it, if they liked it, or not.

I moved around the room sharing parts of the story, explaining how bitou and ferox have defied borders in multiple ways, the ways they challenge us and what they offer in learning about collaborative futures. A couple of people commented on how much they had enjoyed

the bitterness, while others scrunched their face and politely said thank you before exiting after one dip in the jam, not expecting the uneasy combination of flavours. A few people enjoyed several dips, while they asked more questions about the plants and their lives in Australia and South Africa, also enjoying consuming the story through verbal and sensory storytelling and congregating together to talk amongst themselves about plants. Looking at the table and board, the lines had become smudged, bleeding into one another, undone, a mess. Pathways and patterns formed as people dragged the water crackers through the jam. A planterly painting remained as the last people trickled out of the space with bellies and hands sticky with new insights.



I found that the process of making jam helped to unpack the junction between the need to preserve at times, to “hold gently” (van Dooren) and to gently compose certain aspects of culture, environments, memories, but also

to challenge and break down absolute categories and borders, getting intimate and messy with our entanglements. Rather than advocate for an abandonment of borders or of practices of preservation entirely, we may make time to carefully, haptically, *involve* ourselves and our bodies in processes of preserving, *and* of opening up. Compost decomposes yet also preserves the soil. It decays, breaks down and becomes something else that continues metamorphic flows of life in messy and uncontrolled, multispecies ways. As a member of a colonising society, what does it mean for me to advocate for a postcolonial approach to natureculturing, knowing that the past is not able to be erased, that it is part of our collective stories? Perhaps rather than sealing ourselves off from the moral complexity of the harm we cause, we may cultivate micro practices of *DIY violence* with the plants we depend on, in order to take responsibility for our relationships with others, to ingest and swallow all the sweetness and bitterness of our dependence and the subsequent harm we cause to others: plants, and more. *Imperfectly entangled* in participative practices of sharing and experimenting, we are not cut off from what is happening and the role we play in it all. We are weaved in, caring and learning at every step, making complexity visible and tangible. To be a passage for the loved and unloved brings to light our often ignored entanglements with plants in order to value them as much more than merely as ingredients, or as objects for extermination or cultivation. By getting bodily with precarity, we may digest at least some fragmentary possibilities at the edge of sensory borderlands, gradually breaking down the stagnant, absolute, dualistic borders that have been so harmful to us all.

A RECIPE

for

PLANT-HUMAN UNFLATTENING JAM

Traverse the landscape: cityscape, park, sidewalk, or forest. Walk slowly and get to know the plants around you. Begin to research and identify your edible or infusible companions, their histories, stories and entanglements. Choose one, two, three plant collaborators. Learn the best way to forage parts of its body so it is able to recover. Stroke the leaves gently. Make sure it isn't poisonous, but invite scratches and stings. Make clean cuts, get messy. Make sure you pick only what you need, never waste it. Return to ensure it is making a speedy recovery. Optional: reciprocate by donating nutrient rich urine or blood from your own body to the plants.

Ingredients / plant collaborators

Plant collaborator body part/s

Supply-chain considered sugar

Lemons (local if possible, ask a neighbour)

Method

Wash any dirt, smog, spider webs, critters from the plant bodies. Chop them up in whatever way you see fit. Rub the colours and textures into your hands, again considering the plant's various histories, stories and life-ways.

Place in a pot and add just enough water to cover the plant bodies. Add sugar (amount up to you), add juice of the lemons. Bring to the boil, then reduce to simmer for 30-40 minutes until it's all soft. Blend or leave it chunky.

Pour into sterilized jars, or leave it open to pathogens if you want the full story.

Share the jam as well as everything you learned about the plants on your journey of sensory and cultural discovery with others. Detail how you invited plants to *phytomorphize* you, or maybe how it stung or healed you in some way. Maybe you became vulnerable to it, or maybe you weren't able to step out of your anthropocentric mind frame. Encourage others to notice its unique ways of life, its unique tastes, touches, sensory world, its kinships.

Stay infected by the plants you have eaten and made with, and look for ways to ignite your imagination, warp your limited human perceptions and generally "unflatten" (Sousanas) your view and treatment of plants.

This recipe, like our relationships with others, is not final or able to reach a harmony or peace, but constantly evolving, involving, learning, relearning and unlearning through process and ongoing acts of play, noticing, inclusion, responsibility. Like this process of jamming, we listen out for ways to hack preservation and the Anthropocene, and ways to connect while staying open, listening, morphing, always caring.

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