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LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

**Entangled Dialogues: approaches to walking and drawing our
contested tracks**

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This paper explores some of the philosophical, political and visual questions being considered in my current creative practice-led research. I will unpack how my artwork is grappling with a complex entanglement of ideas and images through notions of journeying, multiplicity, enfolding and knotting. Like all entanglements the ideas and images are fluid – sometimes reflecting, sometimes repeating and sometimes conflicting themselves. The threads, shreds, strings and lines of thought and material, are intimately entwined in a web or nest of possibility, and much uncertainty. I often grapple with the order in which to tell the story. Like the way we set out for a particular kind of walk; the paths we choose are sometimes motivated by the bigger questions that drive us, and sometimes the intimate and tactile that embrace us.

Walking as a methodology for relating

‘Walking itself is the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart’ (Solnit 2001, p. 5).

Walking invites the body to move in a rhythmic synchronicity of thought, breath and step. It provides a mode of being in and of moving through an environment with a slowed-down and heightened sensory engagement. Walking can activate a body state that is attentive and aware of where we are and with whom we walk. This, in turn, can invite a rhythmic entanglement of time and place, generating dialogue with the land.

My current interdisciplinary creative research, is investigating how drawing and walking as *embodied* forms of land dialogue, can better nurture relationships of acknowledgement in grounds that bear witness to the complex and troubled imprint of colonisation.

Do forms of embodied land dialogue lead to stronger conversations and exchanges between those of us who share this land and with the land itself, and how might these conversations play out through our images?

These have been key questions in my art practice for many years, as I search for intimate and tactile connections with the land I inhabit, whilst sensitively navigating my cultural and physical terrain.

The site I walk

My practice has always involved the act of walking my local environment - my common, suburban footpath, fringing reserves or bushland. Most recently this practice has involved a site known now as Knocklofty Reserve on the urban fringe of Hobart. This ridgeline extends from where I live and is a corridor to Kunanyi or Mt Wellington. This is Mouheneener country. It's current name means 'lofty hill' originating from the Gaelic word *cnoc* meaning hill and *lofty* meaning high. The name is an example of early European colonial describing and naming practices, which overwrote many existing Aboriginal place names.

This place is thought to have once been a carefully managed grazing hillside for native animals - an important hunting ground for the Mouheneener people. With colonisation came extensive timber harvesting, sandstone quarrying and grazing of cattle to support the growing colony of Hobart. It is now a reserve under the protected areas classification, and the bush is vigorously growing back under the care of the Knocklofty Bush Care group made up largely of enthusiastic locals.

For me this is a place to explore entanglements of image and thought, weaving and knotting threads together by the action of moving through its networks of pathways. Knocklofty is not the subject of my work, but rather a site to explore broader questions of what a walking and drawing based methodology might be, and how it might address some of my philosophical and political questions through an aesthetic enquiry. This is an important point to make, as I see the sites I walk not as places to be *described* or *represented* through my work, but part of a network of places and place relationships that thread my broader concepts and images together.

Like the walking process, I am interested in how the physical actions of drawing and printmaking, with their repetitive, iterative and rhythmic qualities, allow for ones thoughts and ideas to continually move and shift. I liken the making process to the way a walk can invite the mind to simultaneously wander in an entanglement of plans, observations and memories. By collecting, recording, drawing, printing, cutting and collaging, I shift materials and ideas around until they are developed and ready to be organised into a form of resolution or pause. Never fixed and always fluid, my work and process constantly feels like a departure or mid-journey.

Acknowledging what underlies and what we don't know

Writer Nan Shepherd describes her slow and growing relationship with the Cairngorms in the United Kingdom, the country she habitually walked during her long life, in her evocative text *The Living Mountain*. 'Slowly I have found my way in. If I had other senses, there are other things I should know' (Shepherd 2008, p. 107).

I liken this description to the way I often feel as if I am teetering on the edge of knowing, and wishing I had knowledge or 'other senses' to gauge the complexity or depth of the places I walk and make.

I have, like many non-indigenous Australians, experienced a deep sense of sadness in acknowledging the trauma that lies deep in our land. Social theorist Brian Massumi writes:

The horrors and injustices of a place are part of what creates the conditions for that encounter. They are not in anyway neglected. They are refracted. In a sense, the *ground rises with the background*. (Massumi 2013, p. 192)

By actively acknowledging what's beneath our feet and the relationships and narratives that have formed the tracks we walk, I believe we can enter into a richer conversation with country; a conversation that asks us to be accountable to our

histories, but also, importantly, to learn from and generate new relationships from a place of knowing.

In this way I am exploring a dialogue with country through a making process that stems from the principals of acknowledgement, participation and importantly imagination.



Figure 1. Antonia Aitken, from *rising ground series*, 2015. Still from digital video projection on woodcut prints.

Slowness invites dialogue

I am exploring these ideas within the rich and ever growing terrain of research into walking as a philosophical, aesthetic and poetic practice, and aid to thinking, making and conversing.

Central to these areas of thought is a consideration of *slowness*. To slow down is to be more aware - aware of the whole body moving *in relation* with the ground.

Philosopher and feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti, suggests that 'the body is a surface of intensities and an affective field in interaction with others' (Tuin 2012, p. 34). In

this way I understand walking to be an inherently dialogical practice, one that invites a complex and entangled conversation between body and place. 'Place' like 'country' encompasses the multiple relations between the humans and non-humans that exist within it. 'Walking', writes Social Anthropologist Tim Ingold is 'to make ones way through a world-in-formation, in a movement that is rhythmically resonant with the movement of others around us – whose journeys we share or whose paths we cross' (Ingold & Vergunst 2008, p. 2).

We walked and sat and walked some more, in a simple negotiation and movement around one another. Sometimes ahead, sometimes behind, sometimes beside; sometimes in conversation and sometimes in silence - the exchange also in the rhythm of our footsteps, shifting of weight and rubbing of clothes as we continued to walk up the valley.

(Antonia Aitken, journal entry from 27.4.2015 – walking in Gudgenby Valley, ACT with Kirstie Rea)

Human and non-human tracks crisscross the land, our footprints and pathways an intimate sign of a shared habitation. Impressions formed by our contact with the ground, 'their timings, rhythms and inflections' (Ingold & Vergunst 2008, p. 8) are determined by the topography, the presence of others and our reason or purpose for moving.

Physicist David Bohm describes the image of dialogue as 'a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us... out of which will emerge some new understanding' (Bohm 2012, p. 1) and shared meaning.

By acknowledging these crisscrossed journeys when we walk, we are keeping alive the narrative in and of that land/place and creating shared meaning. We are actively remembering – through inviting the past into the present. In this way we are imagining 'all accessible time as rich with possibility' (Rose 2004, p. 25), breaking up linear notions of time (past, present, future) and inviting more responsive entanglements and engagements with place.

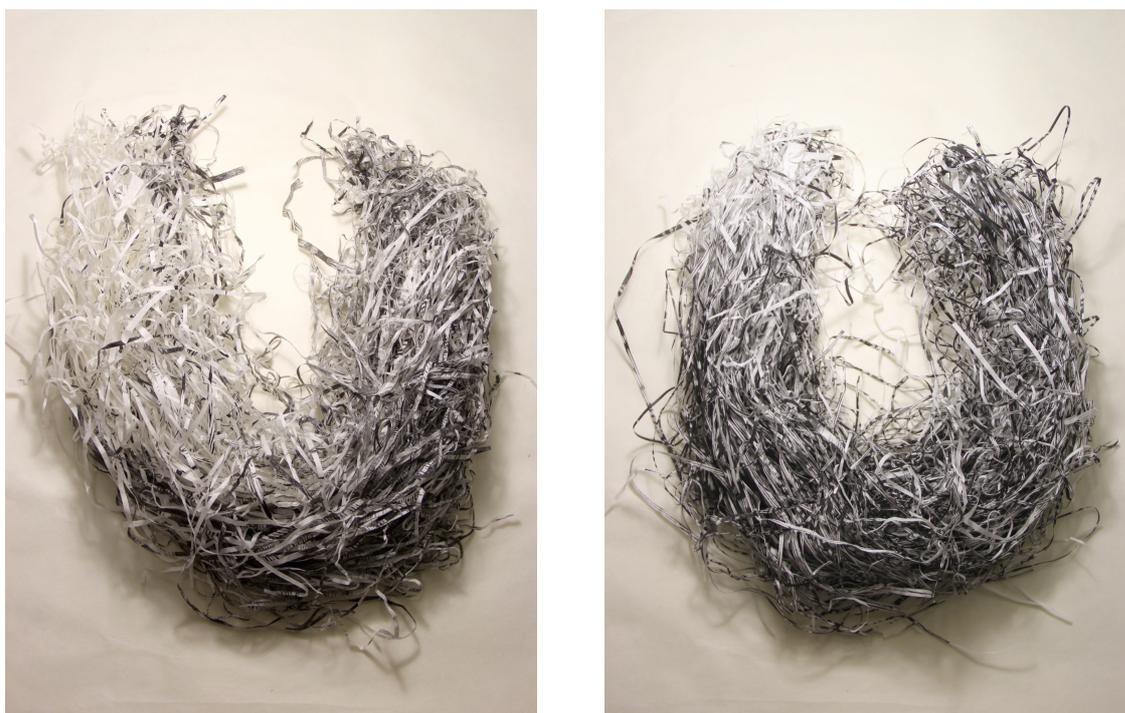


Figure 2. Antonia Aitken, *Entanglements I & II*, from *nests, knots and entanglements series*, 2015. Hand shredded woodcuts.

Shifting linear time concepts

Shifting linear time concepts is one of the key actions towards building recuperative and ethical dialogue with country, as reiterated by key environmental theorists, social anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose and ecological philosopher Val Plumwood.

This concept has become key to the broader questioning in my research as I seek to question western time and narrative concepts and pictorial devices that hinder cross-cultural dialogue. I am making within a growing field of Australian artists, writers and thinkers who are attempting to generate fluid and responsive discourse around the complexity of our contested spaces and interwoven tracks. These writers and makers are attempting to create work that interrogates these dominant cultural frameworks and proposes alternative views and narrative structures, helping to build restorative relationships with country. These models for rethinking cross-cultural

relations are key to building dialogue between those of us who share this land and with the land itself.

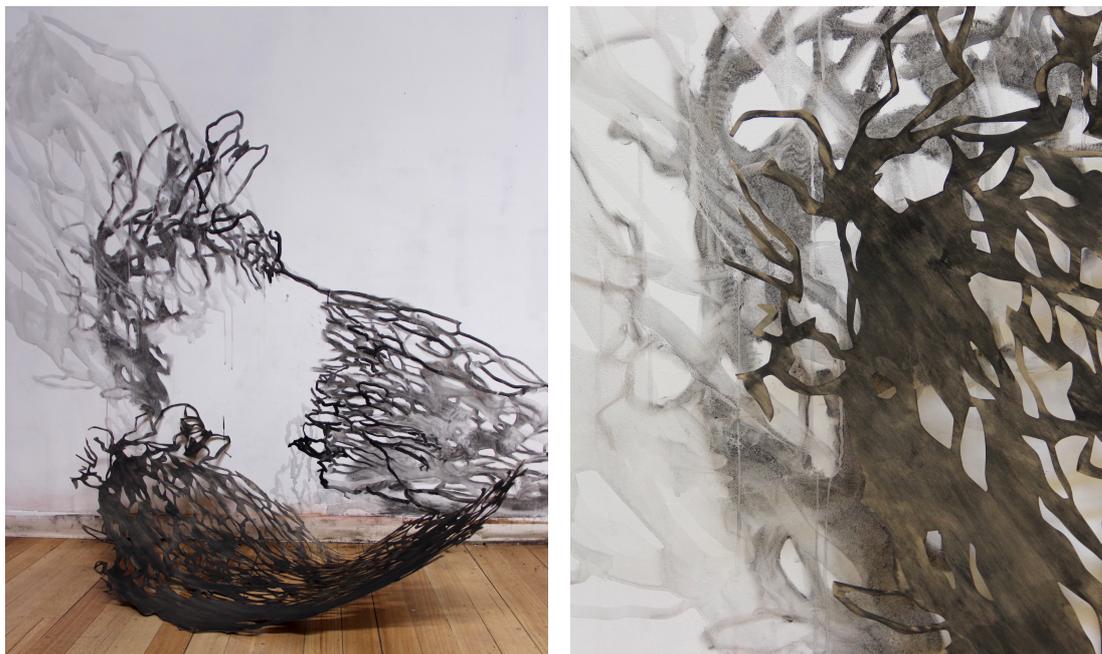


Figure 3. Antonia Aitken, *Peeling*, from *nests, knots and entanglements series*, 2015. Charcoal & ink wall drawing, router-cut plywood form, approx. 250cm (h) x 200cm (l) x 150cm (w).

Journeying and multiplicity

Through the process of moving from Canberra to Tasmania to undertake this project I found myself dragging out the prints that recorded the places I had been, left and longed to return. This process mimicked the packing of my bag, as I pondered and deliberated over what to take and what to leave; what were the necessary items, mementos, mnemonic devices that would transport that 'home' with me into the new?

By exploring the notion of walking or journeying as a dialogical and social practice as described above, it not only provides a way of connecting us with the many narratives that inhabit a place, but also helps us to conceptualise the various locations and attachments we carry with us at anyone time. We are imprinted by all the places we have walked.

My feet felt oddly dented in their soles, as if the terrain over which I passed had imprinted its own profile into my foot, like a mark knuckled into soft clay (Macfarlane 2012, p. 53).

If we think of multiplicity in our notions of place, it helps us to conceptualise 'place' not as fixed or bounded, but as fluid and every changing. This importantly opens us up to broader conceptions of what 'home-place' attachments might be. This is especially relevant for those of us who have culturally bound desires or longings for a fixed 'home' based notion of belonging. In his essay *Motility* about the work of Artist Simryn Gill, Ross Gibson suggests that the Australian experience 'might have less to do with being in a place than it has to being in temporal patterns of movement' and 'in a continual process of reorientation' (Gibson 2013, p. 260).

With this awareness I am choosing to recognise the multiple places I carry with me and the complex entanglement of relations, connections and disconnections that make up a sense of where I am and who I am. It is not one single locus or experience that defines this sense.

Currently I am testing how these images that I have carried with me from Canberra play out in response to Knocklofty and my current place of dwelling.



Figure 4. Antonia Aitken, *Carrying places I & II*, 2015. Hard ground etchings, collaged prints & drawings, 60 x 45cm (each).

Knotting

I am using the notion of *knotting* to describe this interweaving of multiple-place relationships. I am doing this by recycling my drawings, prints and print matrices, knotting them together in the creation of new works.

By collaging and layering the elements together, I am likening them to what historian Dipesh Chakrabaty call's 'time knots' – 'entanglements of real life in time', where past is not overcome or consigned to the past. Time knots, he suggests 'draw us into complex and co-mingled times' (Rose 2004, p. 25). The prints and plates that I am using in my images are all imbedded with the history of my previous relationships with sites and I am inviting them to have meaning and relevance in the present.

Whilst recycling and shifting their meanings through a process of reconfiguration and transformation, their underlying intent is held firmly in their marks. By building

associations between this rich vocabulary of marks, places and tracks (past and present) I am building new forms, relations and images. 'Every step faces both ways' writes Tim Ingold, 'it is both the ending, or tip, of a trail that leads back through our past life, and a new beginning that moves us forward towards future destinations unknown' (Ingold & Vergunst 2008, p. 1).

Enfolding

The notion of subtending and enfolding place is another key concept and image appearing in the work. Place philosopher Edward Casey writes 'If imagination projects us out beyond ourselves, while memory takes us behind ourselves, place subtends us and enfolds us, lying perpetually under and around us' (Casey 1993, p. xvii).

Whilst walking in Knocklofty over the last year and a half, I have come across a number of makeshift shelters; temporary dwellings constructed from the land and formed in reference to the body. Entanglements of time and place that enfold the body, these shelters have become a significant form in my thinking and recent visual experiments. They are ways of both visualising and conceptualising an enmeshment of body with site, figure with ground.



Figure 5. Antonia Aitken, *Enfolding I*, from *nests, knots and entanglements series*, 2015. Charcoal & ink on paper, laser-cut plywood, 60 x 40 x 30cm.

I am exploring this relationship through the notion of the matrix. The matrix is that which underlies or underpins us. It is that in which we are embedded. The land, the plate and paper are all matrices; surfaces, grounds, structures to interact with, shift, mould and disrupt.

An example of this is evident in the way I am attempting to translate a sense of movement, light and shadow present in the land. I am doing this by cutting right through the woodblock. The perforated matrix can channel and project light and shadow into the space and onto paper; from there the shadows can be drawn and cut, building up layers of shifting marks.

By cutting up and reconfiguring of the matrix, the work is beginning to link very much to the way I see walking as a tool to develop more complex and layered ways of experiencing, seeing and responding.



Figure 6. Antonia Aitken, *Enfolding II*, from *nests, knots and entanglements series*, 2015. Charcoal & ink on paper, mono & woodcut print, laser-cut plywood, 60 x 40 x 30cm.

Conclusions

The exploration of an *enfolding* and *knotting* of materials and ideas is helping me find a visual language that enfolds and knots the ground with body. The notion of *entanglement* recognises the complexities in navigating the multiple layers of narrative, relations and personal longings that lie within our land.

If we enter country through *embodied* approaches that slow us down and stimulate heightened sensory encounters, perhaps we can more easily build intimate connections that make us attentive to the ground we are in. I wonder if these affective body states can help us to build stronger and more robust dialogue with country, leading us down paths of acknowledgement, participation and new imaginings.

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