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Botanic field aesthetics: A methodology of embodied research into indigenous Southwest flora

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ABSTRACT: This article describes two prongs of a larger research approach I have termed 'botanic field aesthetics', which begins with living plants in their biodiverse habitats to create embodied poetic representation. The methodology has been designed to materialise and poeticise research into indigenous flora. As components of a broader qualitative field approach, both poetic enquiry and gestural walking constitute specific engagements with plants. The use of poetry and walking aims to show the possibility of an embodied aesthetics of plants and a progression from a visual floral aesthetics to an corporeal floraesthesia, from ocular speculation to multi-sensory experience, and from a metaphysics of being to a poetics of becoming.

Revisiting botanic field work

Walking and writing about plants have been integral practices in the history of Southwest Australian botany ever since Willem Vlamingh first collected specimens along the Swan River in 1696 (Marchant et al.). In 1699, William Dampier landed the *Roebuck* at Shark Bay where he collected native plants and several years later published botanical drawings (Clarke 9). Early European explorers George Grey, John Eyre in 1841 and the Gregory brothers traversed some of the most botanically diverse regions of the state, including present-day Fitzgerald River and Lesueur National Parks, although their plant collecting activities were limited due to the difficulty of field travel. Later in the early colonial period, Government Botanist James Drummond collected a wide variety of Southwest plants from 1829 through 1860 and German naturalist Ludweg Preiss made collections between 1839 and 1842 (Marchant, et al.). In the mid to later nineteenth century, Georgiana Molloy meticulously pressed specimens of Southwest plants near her home in Augusta, many of which are preserved today at the Kew Herbarium in England (Lines). Early twentieth-century biogeographers such as Charles Gardner and contemporary conservation botanists like Stephen Hopper continue the tradition of botanic fieldwork in the region, as begun by early colonial plant collectors.

As put forth by both Gascoigne and Clarke, botanic field studies are normatively the domain of taxonomic plant science. The fieldwork proposed in this article, however, is initiated by a central enquiry rather than a disciplinary question of botanic science

or interdisciplinary question of ecological science. How is it possible to trace a movement from visualistic floral aesthetics to embodied floral aesthesis in relation to the human engagement with the plant life of the Southwest? In responding to this question of philosophical aesthetics, I felt it vitally important to make regular sensory contact with plants in their native habitats. Fieldwork becomes pivotal to critical theory. Thus, I endeavoured to plot out a methodology drawing from the humanities that would provide qualitative field data. Botanic field aesthetics is a mixed methodology deployed at sites of high floral diversity. It is a field aesthetics of plants, which aims to respond to a series of research questions about living indigenous plants in the field, rather than pressed plants in a herbarium or plant extracts in a scientific laboratory. The methodology brings the humanities generally and cultural studies particularly to the study of botanical diversity through five branches of enquiry, two of which are treated in detail in this article. Poetic enquiry extends to the study of flora recent scholarship on the value and efficacy of poetic practice in the social and natural sciences (Cole & Knowles; Leggo; Neilson; Thomas). The practice of 'gestural walking' in the botanic field as an engaged aesthetics of open sensory apprehension (see also Mules; Thoreau).

Poetic enquiry into flora

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses.

– Henry David Thoreau

Language is the shared medium between scientific discourse and the humanities. Poetic enquiry into the botanic field seeks what Hayles (176-177) refers to as the 'two mingled voices' of literature and science. The use of poetic enquiry connects written discourse to aesthetic values and perceptions of plants. The poem 'Orchid anima' explores the feminine body or *anima* of the orchid, particularly the evocation of its anima in the bodily disposition of the engaged viewer. Rather than a mute biological phenomenon, the orchid is syllabistic; their language punctuates the heathlands and is read as a somatic linguistics:



ORCHID ANIMA

sometimes it works well
to hammer your dulcet note
 into the throat of the wind;
it has been a good year,
rain-wise, for the donkey orchids
 of the Eneabba sand plains.

sanguine-yellow tremors in air,
stammerings of petal-syllables,
 cheeks animated by the vivid flush
of pigments bladdered in downpour,
un-delicate elementals, entirely
 guarded by scorpion plectra.

love-children at the sun's last flaring—
at certain angles, they are coy
 faces squinching noon-burnt noses,
curved upon by casuarina locks;
then their tongues madden with desire,
 and limp waspy legs dangle forth.

etheric flowerers who are not yet mass,
who are too light for air, four dimensions
 of blossom conjured from sand,
residues of sky slumbering in earth:
orchid anima, punctuating the heathland
 at the cusp of darkness.

Image 1: Diuris orchids at Fitzgerald River National Park (photographed by J. Ryan)
(published originally in Perilous Adventures 10:02)

The embedded poetics of botanical nomenclature are striking. The poetic nuances of scientific naming suggested the inherent linkages between art and science, between poetic language and scientific taxonomy. Rather than abstruse and arbitrary, scientific name-giving, considered anathema to poetic instantiation, enciphers rich cultural histories and reflects poetic outlooks of plants throughout the history of botanical science. Present, though encoded, in taxonomic speak, this duality of embedded poetics is evident in the earliest writings of Linnaeus who in *Deliciae naturae* reveals the linguistic structure of his taxonomic sorting and naming of life. The Swedish botanist describes the cross-over between the language of science and the language of culture: 'The botanical terms correspond to letters, the names of the plants to words and the systems to the grammar' (quoted in Sharr vii). For Linnaeus, the language of scientific taxonomy was more than a technical assemblage of letters, words and grammar. His language incorporated poetic idiom, and hence nomenclature was learned as a technical system in order to appreciate linguistic musicality and poetics. Linnaeus (quoted in Sharr vii) states that 'to learn a language requires an acquaintance (to some extent at least) with its letters, words, and grammar. Then only, and not until then, can one enjoy all the beautiful compositions in that language'. Compelling and contradictory, scientific names in circulation in technical treatises are utterances and recitations of poetic perceptions, aesthetic tastes and cultural values.

The practices of botanical science de-culturate plants, removing them from specific niches on one side of the globe in order to reconfigure them into predictable abstractions on the other side, far removed from the original habitat. The tools of science transport the abstract data of plant names and chemical constituents—as well as the dead and living organic material of specimens and seeds—across space and time beyond contexts of ecology and culture. Yet, taxonomic names are imbued with poetic and cultural meanings engrained in the language of science. The Golden Kangaroo Paw (*Anigozanthos pulcherrimus*) for instance, is a plant that only occurs in an uncultivated state in the Southwest corner of Western Australia. In the nineteenth century, Swan River colony botanist and plant collector James Drummond first sent a Golden Kangaroo Paw specimen to botanist James Hooker in England and described the plant to his colleague as the loveliest flower of Western Australia. Consequently, according to botanist Stephen Hopper (personal communication, September 9, 2009), Hooker chose the species name, *pulcherrimus*, or 'most beautiful' in Latin. So, despite the culture-free, reductionist pretence of science, its language is hand-in-glove with that of history, poetics and aesthetics. The relationship between taxonomic and poetic enquiry—and between discourses of science and the humanities—is therefore not one of mutual exclusion but of overlay (see Ryan, forthcoming).

Poetic enquiry is a form of arts-based, qualitative research with an increasingly rigorous theoretical foundation. Cole and Knowles (59) describe arts-based research as a 'mode and form of qualitative research in the social sciences that is influenced by, but not based in, the arts broadly conceived'. A goal of arts-based research is 'to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional)

processes and representational forms of inquiry' (59). Although arts-based enquiry is steeped in the social sciences and expressly concerned with the human condition, its application can be extended to the understanding of the natural world and to the human relationship to flora. Lorri Neilson describes 'lyric enquiry' as a process of engagement and a written outcome characterised by song-like or poetic language. For poet Carl Leggo (168), poetry is a discursive practice and 'a way of knowing, being, and becoming in the world'. Hence, the practice of poetry is poiētic as it reveals a process of knowledge and unfolding experience, rather than purely fixed instances of aesthetic imagery. Poetry expresses 'ongoing engagement' with the world beyond the demarcations between the creative arts and social sciences imposed by the academy (168).

The use of poetic enquiry aims to engage the questions: how do plants evolve to our senses over the seasons, how do these sensory qualities change based on topographic, environmental or perceptual factors, and how does an aesthetics of the 'scenery cult' become an aesthesis of bodily engagement? I suggest the role of poetic practice in engaging an embodied aesthesis of plants. Poiēsis is defined as 'making' or 'becoming'; poetry is a method of apprehending the world in becoming; and plants as living mutable organisms are always already in the process of becoming. As Leggo (166) reminds us, the term 'poetry' is derived from the Greek poiein 'to make'. Poetry is what Heidegger (59) repeatedly refers to in *On the way to language* as 'an experience with language'. As a form of enquiry into flora, poetic practice is the undergoing of an experience with plants and language, or plants through language. In considering this conjunction, botanical metaphor qualifies language as 'the flower of the mouth. In language the earth blossoms toward the bloom of sky' (99) (see Ryan, "Plants that Perform for You?").

Poetic enquiry into flora and landscape creates expressive forms based in what Porteous calls 'geoautobiography', or the interrelation between personal history and the story of the land in which both are inseparable. An embodied aesthetics, where the materiality of the landscape and the body of the human are fused geoautobiographically and poetically, emerges in the work of Suzanne Thomas. In *Of earth and flesh and bones and breath*, Thomas employs poetic practice to develop a perceptual approach coastal Canadian islands. Poetry of corporeal sensation alternates with images of decay in forging an aesthetics of palpable, multi-sensory placement in the intertidal zone between land and sea where the study takes place. In 'Prima materia', Thomas writes of the body of a dead seal: 'Ripe flesh, rotting skin/ lie transmutable/ carrion, offal, microbe, maggot/ dissolving body returns to earth' (170). Through the sensory-rich language of sight, smell and touch and the shifting images of such words as 'dissolving', the poem positions the human body as an mediating sensorium between landscape and subject. Expression takes on a corporeal quality, transcending the distancing mechanism of sight, and rupturing the perceived chasms between subject and object, human and landscape and feeling and intellect. The poetic verse deepens and extends the images of bodily decay throughout the work, thus invoking poiēsis.

The poem 'Sunday Zamia swagger' uses the multiple senses of touch, sound, smell and taste to explore the Zamia Palm, a villified plant in colonial times for its poisonous properties, but a treasured food to Aboriginal people of the region. The poem juxtaposes walking as an engaged activity and mechanised travel as one inducing states of lethargy and complacency:

SUNDAY ZAMIA SWAGGER

by the fire, Sunday morning I imagine by-yu
so meander out to the plicae between rolling land

higher to the scarp where the red gums thicken;

a Qantas jet groans, the sun strikes sporadically,
under the path of flight through autumn clouds—

from its lonely nook, a dusky roo breaks into
fricatives;

cross-hatches of wash-outs and dirt tracks
to the bitumen wending west to Swan View;

a scenic vista, lugubrious cars slanted at the edge

a woman with a crew-cut extinguishes a butt
a faceless man slinks into the peace of nothingness

others pass slowly the way to better things:

an imperturbable hydra, squat black trunk
leaflets stiff as blinds, crisp as piano keys played

forté in one long swipe through seven octaves;

tawny cones leaking aloe, striking the nostrils
larghissimo, tessellations of earth acridities

eerily dying back into a rotunda of arachnid legs;

Grey observed 'violent fits of vomiting'
Vlamingh, 'no distinction between death and us'

savouring its bready fruits, unsoaked like hazels,

cattle staggered at the poison of the New World,
encased, yet to come, in the sweet flesh of a nut.

Poetic research at sites of high floristic diversity in the Southwest exemplify a kind of literary data of the botanic field presented here in the form of an interlude. An interlude is an intervening section from a larger performance piece. Poetic-botanic interludes attempt to provide examples of how poetic enquiry into Southwest flora can evoke an aesthesis of plants by re-embodiment of the language of plants and enfolding the visual apprehension of flora into the tissue of human and plant bodies. The interludes endeavour to concretise the application and embodiment of poetic theory, whilst communicating tangible sensory instances of engagement with flora and the praxis of poeticised botany. Each poem relates threshold moments of transition between states of appearance in the landscape and the deep interweaving of visual aesthetics into a fuller embodied sensorium consisting of bodily sensation, personal memory, botanical nomenclature, cultural history and metaphorical association.

My process of writing poetry began often in the sensation of my body in the presence of the individual plant or the collective plantscape. Many of the poems are triggered by corporeal impressions of sharing the plant's habitat for that moment during a particular season. I recorded the aesthetic qualities of the site in what I called at the time an 'aesthetic matrix' that indexed the features of the plants and the landscape. Through immersion in these qualities, I then attempted to link poetic expression to aesthetic perception in the form of field notes. Several themes recur in the poems, including bodily metaphors expressing plants and the plantscape as coterminous and consanguineous with the human body. Each poem was usually finalised several months after the field experience, so I had a gap of time into which percolated a collection of technical facts, namings, and lore along with the residual bodily experiences of the plant. Hence, the poems express an embodied experience of the flora connected to its human cultural history and broader ecological meanings.

Gestural walking

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for SAUNTERING...

– Henry David Thoreau

I define gestural walking as a specific kind of embodied bipedality in landscapes, a form of bodily enquiry linking to, and amplifying, poetic practice. The purpose of gestural walking is to provide the researcher with a basis for experiencing the landscape in aesthetically connected, multi-sensory and meta-visual ways. Walking is corporeal knowing and a way towards embodiment. Bipedal human bodies walk through plant communities, encountering the bodies of the plant world. Walking is generally thought of as an ordinary, commonplace or perfunctory human action. The

word ‘pedestrian’ refers to one who walks as a noun and, as a descriptor, to characterise an activity as prosaic or dull. Places of high botanical diversity are usually preserved as national or regional parks where the appreciation of landscape and the plants is restricted to travel on foot. Walking from plant to plant, between biotic communities, creates continuity and situates the research within a broader sense of place through the body. As mentioned previously, movement on foot also invokes the tradition of the plant collector, such as Georgiana Molloy whose ‘collecting walks’ in Augusta and Vasse in the Southwest helped her to learn the native flora, connect with knowledgeable Aboriginal botanists, and overcome isolation on the nineteenth-century settler frontier (Harper 8). Bipedality in biodiverse habitats entails engaged experience of plants that puts us in touch with the landscape and disrupts the hierarchies inherent to the faculty of vision. Walking is the practice of becoming in a body and navigating through and within botanic communities, thus orienting human action towards plants through the senses. The act of walking demands bodily presence of perception. In the essay ‘Walking’, Henry David Thoreau in ‘Walking’ stresses the relationship between the landscape and his ambulatory body: ‘there is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles’ radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life.’

Thoreau remains sentient during the act of walking as a means of corporeal participation in the land: ‘the thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses’. However, in reading the journals of early European explorers who travelled by foot across the Southwest landscape, I was struck by the usage of picturesque language in the depiction of indigenous flora. Plainly absent were sensations, metaphors, and situations that placed the body within the landscape as an instrument of perception, as a gauge of the writer’s experience through the landscapes. Arguably, the walks of the early explorers were not the leisurely perambulations of Thoreau or the Romantic walkers of the English countryside. Starvation, malnutrition, disease, the threat of violent attack, madness and isolation plagued European explorers like John Eyre. Indeed, Driver raises questions about the authority of the landscape observations of early explorers and argues that the accuracy of documents, such as journals, might have been affected by forms of field disturbance—madness, illness, starvation or even difficulties with the process of recording information. Yet, still, how could the body be so fully abnegated in the depiction of the landscape in early explorer journals?

The poem ‘Smokebush coda’ relates the plant body to the human body, promoting the embodied aesthetics I’ve been suggesting. Smokebush is used commonly in flower essence therapy. After surgery to remove a lesion on my scalp, I used smokebush to facilitate the healing of the wound. There are non-material and even spiritual implications to this kind of engagement with plants:

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SMOKEBUSH CODA *Conospermum stoechadis*

I touch the crown of my skull
a shallow crater
dibbled out by the surgeon's

falchion and empathise
with the planet
pockmarked by meteorites

the cicatrix of rogue stars
collided
into its tender gyrating soma

like Chicxulub under the Yucatán
from space
daubed in sooty clouds the hue

of a man's beard in middle years
shared colour
of the left-slanted scripting

smokebush before our horde
staunchly leaning
in the brusque huddle-together

kwongan season earliness
the sea scended
rushed down into the inky pit

doused the bolide flumed
up a patois
of protea for which we lull

now alert for Orpheus
in the laterite
creeping up the waving panicle

musical draught, chakric paeon
an essence soaking in
squelching the nervous nexus

firestorm in my indentation
stochastic *stoechadis*
a blossomed healing interruption.

In response to the question of disembodiment, I began to consider Thoreau's praxis of walking as sensuously unique, as 'gestural walking' in which the sense faculties are open and bodily contact with the landscape becomes, in Mules' terms, 'the openness of the body to the outside, the gesture that makes contact with the world' (6). Rather than the faculty of vision occluding the non-visual senses, sense experience through gestural walking reaches a state of exposure to the externalised landscape and openness of the heterogeneous sense faculties. Gestural walking involves reaching out to the plant, physically through the ears, nose, tongue, mouth and skin, and also through a proximity of vision, putting our eyes closer to the miniature details that go unregistered in the picturesque view of landscape and appending vision to the other sense faculties as a synergistic aspect of open aesthetic perception. This way of walking entails pointing, touching, bending, smelling, picking, tasting, spitting out and throwing away. Simply put, as I practiced gestural walking at the field study sites, I became more attuned to the diverse sensory qualities of the indigenous flora and my appreciation took a broader form of deeper meaning. A phenology of walking connects the seasons to the 'becoming' of plants through their phases of flowering, dehiscing, shedding bark and fruiting.

Conclusion: Towards embodied engagements with plants

Botanic field aesthetics brings sensual, non-scientific knowledge to our engagement with plants and their ecologies. By going beyond the 'loaded aesthetic appeal of the flower', to borrow a turn of phrase by visual artist Gregory Pryor, the methodology situates aesthetic engagement with flora in a multi-sensory, temporal, embodied and regionally-focused appreciation. Poetic enquiry and gestural walking used in combination reveal the possibility of sensuously rich relationships to plants that go beyond the visually privileged, closed categorical system of taxonomic science and floral aesthetics. Through the practice of botanic field aesthetics new knowledge formations, based outside of hierarchical subject to object dynamics of classical science, are given space to emerge.

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