

Touching, holding, diffracting, (re)presenting: being with data and place

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Abstract: Sometimes data invites more of us. To be physically held and touched, through hands creating and crafting with matter, cultivating a closer connection to the fibres, threads, textures and sinews of data. Through touching and shaping the materiality of data, other beings, places and times are aroused. In this workshop I will share the story of data that invited more of me. And how this has spurred the creation of an exhibition titled **Storying ancestry and place: interrogating belonging in Australia** with Indigenous and non-Indigenous artist/scholars for an arts festival in Queensland, Australia. This work is positioned as an experimentation in bridging spaces between educational, academic and artistic institutions.

I would like to acknowledge the profound wisdom of the elders past present and future of the lands of which I have inhabited and walked.

I am a descendent of white occupiers living on stolen land – the nation that is known now as Australia – my specific locale is Tarau-nga – place of stones to the traditional custodians and owners the Jagera and Turrbul people.

I am torn apart with tangled feelings of love and shame in being Australian. The energies and rhythms of the soil, stones, water, flora, mountains, skies, and living beings warm me. Whilst, the prolific genocide and ecocide violations of the nation building project of Australia fill me with gut wrenching horror and shame.

I am not proud to call myself Australian and feel that white Australians need to interrogate what it means to call ourselves Australian. We are diaspora, with unknown uncertain homelands. Where do we belong? Why are we here? I am acutely aware that -

“the sense of belonging, home and place enjoyed by the non-Indigenous subject - coloniser/ migrant - is based on the dispossession of the original owners of the land and the denial of [their] rights under international customary law” (Moreton-Robinson, 2017, para 1). In stark contrast, Aboriginal Australians “sense of belonging is derived from an *ontological relationship*” (Moreton-Robinson, 2017, Indigenous belonging, para 2) that occurs “through the inter-substantiation of ancestral beings, humans and land - it is a form of *embodiment*” (Moreton-Robinson, 2017, Indigenous belonging, para 5). Aboriginal Australian ontology is founded on the principle of spiritually belonging to country, whereas White Australians claim that the country belongs to them based on principles of individualism and capitalism, in short – greed.

I recently had the great pleasure and privilege of co-writing a book titled *Research through, with and as storying* (2018) with Ngugi and Wakka Wakka woman Tracey Bunda. In writing this book we located ourselves in place and ancestral storying. The provocation to do such led us both to searching archives for our ancestor’s stories. There are few stories in archives, instead scientific dehumanized records dominate. Record keepers’ clinical interpretations track, categorise and surveil.

To reclaim, disrupt and humanise the archives, Tracey and I created with archival data.

Let me tell the story of the data that invited more of me - more than reading, thinking, writing, but to touch the matter of data, to hold its form, to shape, to pull, to push, to pinch, to cut, to penetrate. An encounter of “entangled relation of data-and-researcher” that MacLure (2013) writes on in the wonder of data, when “the inert corpus (corpse) of the data, ...grasp[s] us” (p. 228).

On a recent visit to Tasmania, I went searching for archives on my great-great grandmother Nancy Ann. I knew she was a transported convict from Belfast to Van Diemen’s Land (the early colonial name for Tasmania). My family had records of her husband William and it was his story that was told and overtime I realised this is fucked – male history dominates – what is Nancy Ann’s story.

In the Tasmanian Archives I found multiple documents that mapped how Nancy Ann was positioned:

Her Convict Record

Permission for William to marry her

But it was the record of her description in The Surgeon’s journal of the ship she was transported in that invited more of me.

Her description was scientifically recorded. Trade: house servant. Height: 5 foot 2 3/4 inches. Age: 16. Complexion: fresh. Head: oval. Hair: sandy brown. Visage: oval rather small. Forehead: retreating. Eyebrows: dark brown thin. Eyes: brown. Nose: straight. Mouth: small. Chin: small. Remarks C C S P M A M C and W M above elbow on right arm and R R M R S R T R J D and two hearts above elbow on left arm. The hand-written script was difficult to decipher. I looked to the lovely Jasmine who was assisting me in Tasmania’s archives and asked what is this? – ‘Perhaps tattoos’ she replied.

This newly found knowledge that my great-great grandmother had tattoos – was genuinely surprising – I had never thought about women in the 1800s with tattoos and why all those initials.

I read up on convict tattoos, I retraced her footsteps in the town of her displaced incarceration – Hobart – I sat and held this piece of data and wondered if these were the stories of her tattoos.

Knowing her sentence of transportation to an unknown territory of Van Diemen’s Land, and leaving everything that she knew behind - her family, her home, her friends, her way of life, and the measly few belongings she possessed- her body was the only space on which she could record her history and her hopes. Over time, with a loosened floor board nail the initials C C S P M A M C W M were etched into the skin above Nancy Ann’s right elbow, and R R M R S R T R J D and two hearts above her left elbow. Whatever soot that could be retrieved from prison lamps were rubbed into the wounds for an embodied permanent trace of those she was leaving behind. In amidst those initials, perhaps the Ms were her mother and her sister both named Mary and the T and J for her father Thomas and her brother John. Or a more sickeningly thought perhaps is that they were not a sovereign body claim, but clientele claiming female body territory through branding (Barnard, 2016) from her ‘two years on the town’ noted on her convict record at the age of 15. To Nancy Ann,

life was withdrawing heart and soul deep within, and seizing available opportunities.

I needed to do more. “Wonder is...preeminently material: it insists in bodies as well as minds” (MacLure, 2013, p. 229). It was not about knowing why the tattoos and what the initials represented, (that was Nancy Ann’s intimate story – Nancy Ann is no longer here to consent to share her story - I respect her right to posthumous privacy) – sitting with the not knowing – the liminal - the uncertainties – to feel the experience of not knowing (see Pink, 2015), I had the burgeoning urge to hold and touch – prompted by ethicality rather than the thirst for cognitive knowledge. Through art, I wanted to be with the sensation, affects and intensities (Deleuze, 1990) of the penetration of flesh and to honour and reclaim the sovereignty of these body markings. If there was shame with these tattoos I sought to offer beauty and tenderness. For a long time, I wondered what matter to make with - in time I was led to cloth and stitching – to re-ascribe feminine crafts of the time.

I found a remnant piece of fine white cotton in my fabric collection. I cut and ripped a strip thinking of an armband – the black armband is symbolic of mourning and Australian history that acknowledges the genocide, theft of land and peoples on Aboriginal Australians is mocked as a black armband view of Australian history by right wing conservatives (e.g., Blainey, 1993). Nancy Ann’s story was that of a white women of poverty. I mourned for her violated life. The armband claimed visibility of the horror and pain of her violation.

I sensed every cut for every line of each inked initial ingrained into her skin. I held the puncturing of needle into flesh through stitching the initials into the strip of cotton. Though the initials are representational – the intent was not to accurately represent but instead to hold each line of each initial – it was about the endurance and the form.

And on completing the 10 initials and two hearts, I pulled at the weft and warp threads with a felting needle to embody and hold the ongoing abuse - the wear and tear of a harsh life. I drank tea whilst I stitched, then submerged the cloth in the remnants, sharing fluids, sharing staining.



Figure 1: Louise Gwenneth Phillips, August 2017, 'Nancy Ann's left arm (re)marks'

On ending my making/creating of Nancy Ann's body markings – I tenderly held the stitched cloth in the palms of my hands - for that is what I was ethically urged to do. This was a beginning and a moment.

This stitching work was about making time for ethically and sensory knowing and being, as Jane Bennett (2009) explains on vital materiality that “the starting point of ethics is less the acceptance of the impossibility of ‘reconciliation’ and more the recognition of human participation in a shared vital materiality...the ethical task is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it (p. 14).

Whole of body sensing of interconnectedness/interrelationality evokes ethicality, that is, “hospitality to the stranger threaded through oneself and through all being and non-being” (Barad, 2014, p. 163). In this space, self-interests dissipate and the attention is to ‘being with’. Such responsibility entails “an ongoing responsiveness to the entanglement of self and other, here and there, now and then” (Barad, 2007, p. 394).

My stitching work with Nancy Ann's tattoo inscriptions was about being entangled with the materiality and sensoriality of the moment and of memories and imaginaries - as Sarah Pink (2009) explained in doing sensory ethnography. I also sense a reciprocity in the making with data to honour and hold and sense – a gifting.

From a quantum physics position, I felt the entanglements of my life, my body with Nancy Ann's. In quantum dis/continuity there is no overarching sense of temporality, of continuity, in place. Each scene diffracts various temporalities within and across the field of spacetime-mattering. Scenes never rest, but are reconfigured within, dispersed across, and threaded through one another (Barad, 2010, p. 240).

By threading past, present, and future through one another, an integrative depth of sense of self and place is woven. The ‘past’ and the ‘future’ are iteratively reworked and enfolded through the iterative practices of spacetime-mattering” (Barad, 2010, pp. 260-261). Locating self in ancestral storying is an iterative reworking and enfolding of past, present and future, that is spacetime-mattering.

Through art, I could express ethicality and relationality with Nancy Ann's lived flesh encounters “to not just satisfy but also to intensify—to resonate and become more than itself...the creation of forms through which these materials come to generate and intensify sensation and thus directly impact living bodies, organs, nervous systems” (Grosz, 2008, p. 4).

A two-dimensional photo of my stitching of Nancy Ann's tattoos is in the book I coauthored with Tracey Bunda. Yet it and the collaborative work we created were not justly honoured when represented in two-dimensional form.

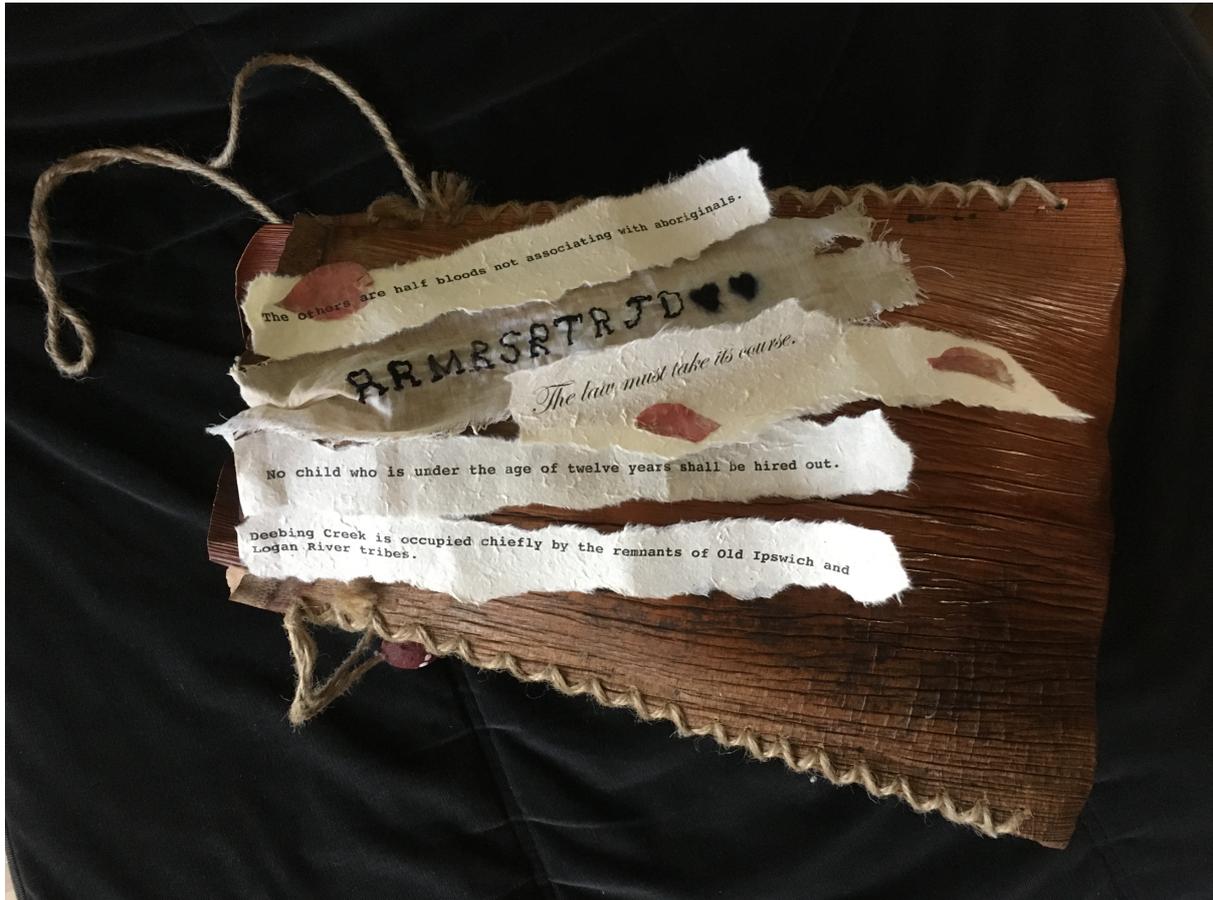


Figure 2: Tracey Bunda & Louise Gwenneth Phillips, August 2017, 'Basket of entangled archives'

They deserved to be honoured in the fullness of all dimensions. And so, Tracey and I pitched the idea for a performative exhibition of storied ancestry and place to the Anywhere Festival, Brisbane, Australia and was accepted. We knew other women in our circles that were also interrogating belonging through research creation and invited them to contribute – so we are now a group of 8 Aboriginal Australian and White Australian women – *Sistas holding space*.

We are now in the process of developing a collated performative exhibition titled *Stories of belonging: black and white artist women tell, sing, dance, paint, sculpt, stitch ancestry and place* in which each of us performs a creative work that interrogates black and white women's belonging in Australia on the 17th and 18th May at the Talking Circle space of the State Library Queensland. I will embody Nancy Ann's tattooed story through ethical, sensorial, relationality with coarse materiality – etching in(on)to skin, stitching in(on)to cloth resonant phrasings on (dis)belonging.

Collectively, we are claiming that our arts based work on ancestry and belonging deeply interrogates our ontological positionality as researchers, in particular what this means in the Australian context – a colonised nation (e.g., see Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2014). The scars of colonisation are held and heard through Black and White Australian women creating and interrogating belonging alongside each other – listening and holding space for each other. We air the pains of ontological destruction, silencing, disconnection and emptiness.

We claim this space by bridging spaces between academics, artists, and public programs, arguing that this is not just a conversation for the academy but rather it is a necessary public conversation and that the combined embodied intellectual work of artist/researchers provokes epistemological shifts.

“we need to be attentive and open to surprise to recognize the invitation; and once invited in, our task is to experiment and see where that takes us” (MacLure, 2013, p. 231).

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