



unctures
The Journal for Thematic Dialogue

25: judgement

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Edward Hanfling	Editorial: 'judgement'	6
Raewyn Martyn	Multi-dimensional Painting	10
Michael Cop & Janel Atlas	Judging a Type of Character: The Anointing Women, Mindfulness, and Beginner's Mind	42
Ewa A. Łukaszuk	<i>Cultured</i> Readings: Transcoloniality and Aesthetic Judgement in Global Literary Criticism	55
Krishanu Singh, Shuchi Agrawal & Payal Nagpal	Witchcraft, Judgement and Cultural Perception: The Case of Jharkhand	67
Isabella Lepoamo	Tender Monuments—Sacred Ordinary Revisited	77

EDWARD HANFLING

Editorial: 'judgement'

In my first year of undergraduate study at the University of Auckland in 1994, I wrote an art history essay about impressionism—handwritten, with that extra big margin for the marker's comments. I cannot now remember what it was that I argued, but I remember that I had an argument. I deliberately tried to shoot down a particular interpretation that I found pervasive in whatever books I had read at that time. I remember that Claude Monet's eyesight came into it somewhere. And I suspect that, if I read it now, I would be embarrassed at the holes in my argument, albeit with some admiration for my eighteen-year-old self at making the attempt. I know I was both naïve and headstrong. I had, after all, lived most of life to that point in Hamilton, where the cacophony of cowbells ringing in support of the local rugby team was what counted as "culture." It had not yet dawned on me how immeasurably greater than mine was the knowledge of my lecturers and of the art historians whose books I was subjecting to inchoate critique.

The tutor (Teaching Assistant) who marked the essay was generous and genuinely interested. She wrote plenty of both encouragement and rebuttal in those wide margins, which made me feel not only that I belonged in academia, but that academia was the most perfect place imaginable. The whole point of the thing, it seemed, was that academics could freely contradict, provoke and attack other academics, without harming them at all, because it was, as they say, purely academic—in a world of ideas and theories, not "reality." I threw myself into this abstractly adversarial world with considerable gusto.

I soon discovered, to my surprise, that the reactions to what I said and wrote were uncontroversially "real." Not only did people disagree with what I said, they plainly found me disagreeable for having said it. My argumentative principle—of saying the opposite of whatever was the most widely held opinion—was liable to cause irritation. Even that gentle and genial art historian, Francis Pound (who always seemed to have time to talk with the lowly undergrad who dropped by his office with impertinent questions and outlandish theories), used to say that I was "perverse."

Now, I feel a twinge of nostalgia in telling this story, as well as some fear of judgement (because it is unbecoming of a serious scholar to indulge in such autobiography). No doubt academia is still a world in which critical thinking has value, and judgement,

at least theoretically, can operate at a remove from the personal. But times have changed. There is a growing realisation that critique, criticism, critical theory and critical thinking are not only impotent but self-defeating and potentially harmful in the face of the contemporary realities. We thought that these were useful tools for furthering progressive thought and countering unreasonable and entrenched beliefs. It turns out that they also further entrench oppositions between competing ideologies and reaffirm existing paradigms and conventions. Critical judgements perpetuate combative, competitive modes of being, while leaving the prevailing positions on the field of battle relatively unchanged.

In contemporary culture, there is evidence of a growing realisation that judgements get in the way of empathetic and cooperative relationships between people. They operate under the guise of reason and rationality, as an intellectual game that separates mind from body and fosters the repression of non-discursive feelings and experiences. Yet they incite highly emotive reactions, get people's backs up, sometimes hurt them and certainly have real impacts. Strategies such as mindfulness and non-violent communication encourage us to recognise the judgements we habitually make, but to acknowledge and appropriately express our own and others' feelings. There are compelling arguments for care and compassion to take precedence over intellectual point-scoring. Mental health and neurodiversity are increasingly handled, by younger generations especially, with acceptance and candour, regarded not as symptoms of weakness or failure but as positive attributes that afford new ways of seeing the world—even as drivers of activism and social change, as advocated by Kai Syng Tan.¹

On the other hand, the staunch refusal, on the political left, to allow space for anything that carries the whiff of, or bears some resemblance to, discredited attitudes, particularly with regard to cultural or gender identity, arguably constitutes an uncompromising form of judgement. And it has provoked a newly virulent opposition. Right-wing populist movements thrive on a backlash against “woke” and “political correctness” and the “extremist” cancelling of a “commonsense” world view (read “conservative” or “bigoted”). Indeed, we are now overwhelmed by violent judgements that bring with them not only a gleeful dismantling of the gains made for marginalised identities and communities in the post-1960s period, but an undisguised, fascistic reimplementing of persecution and oppression.

In art, the role of the critic has become increasingly complicated since the 1960s, when the avant-garde exploded into all manner of ways of making art (including conceptual and performance art) that defied a purely form-based judgement of artistic quality. The American critic Lucy Lippard wrote of the difficulty of determining an artwork's political value or efficacy: “Perhaps the greatest challenge to the feminist movement in the visual arts ... is the establishment of new criteria by which to evaluate not only the aesthetic effect, but the communicative effectiveness of art.”² A similar issue arises in the judgement of Indigenous art by Western critics. In Aotearoa New Zealand, former Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki curator Ngahiraka Mason has written of the ignorance of Pākehā appraisals of Contemporary Māori Art: “The New Zealand contemporary art world can be a particularly dogged place of resistance when it comes to understanding why Māori produce artworks that challenge interpretation in Western terms.”³

In fact, the art critic's position has always been unenviable, insofar as they are trying to cope with the reality that artists are always, as it were, ahead of them. The artist brings into the world something that was not there before—that is unlike existing artworks (or existing anything-else) and therefore impervious to any previously deployed set of evaluative criteria. Art is exploratory and speculative, and even as it seeks to represent one thing, it cannot help but create another, operating materially and ontologically, altering reality. It is not surprising, then, that since the turn of the millennium, there has been a conspicuous turn in contemporary art away from the “shock of the new” and towards an ethics of care and working responsibly with materials, environments, things and beings, human and non-human. Nor is it surprising that art has come to be regarded as conducive to forms of experience that elude interpretive or analytical methods, in parallel with the “ontological turn” in philosophy and critical theory.

In 2004, Bruno Latour published an essay titled “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” He proposed that critique, as a method used to expose mechanisms of power and ideology, had been turned against academia, its inherent scepticism of truth claims becoming a liability. The same scepticism was now more widely used to deny the realities of climate change, racism or any of the other issues that inspired such critique in the first place. In response, Latour called for a creative (rather than judgemental) critical ethos that would enhance (rather than undermine) reality: “The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is ... the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.”⁴ Rita Felski picked up this proposition in her 2015 book *The Limits of Critique*, a critique (for want of a better word) of what she calls (using Paul Ricoeur's words) “the hermeneutics of suspicion.”⁵ Neither Latour nor Felski, however, advocate for the abandonment of critical analysis altogether, but rather for extending or enriching it by way of an openness to unexpected and imaginative relationships and experiences, a speculative ethics.

Judgements can appear arbitrary and groundless, particularly in contexts (such as contemporary art) where the criteria are unclear or unstable. Judgement can be culturally blind, based on ignorance or disregard for world views different to one's own; or harmful to mental health or wellbeing (a repercussion more conspicuous than ever in today's culture of candour and diagnosis). And judgement, no matter how rigorously supported, can be stultifying, imposing the illusion of resolution, closure or an endpoint, rather than opening up more discussion. Nevertheless, there is no end to judgement. To refrain from judgement might, after all, mean allowing reprehensible or unsupportable views to go unchallenged, or signal a pusillanimous acceptance of the prevailing state of affairs. But such evaluative abstinence would be not just untenable, but impossible. I often find myself returning to Barbara Herrnstein Smith's classic 1988 *Contingencies of Value*, a sophisticated study in post-modern relativism that simultaneously challenges entrenched values and socio-political power relationships while acknowledging the inevitability of judgement.⁶ In a 2013 interview, Herrnstein Smith commented: “We evaluate all the time. It's not a matter of should or shouldn't. We can't stop ... We continuously orient ourselves different toward things that seem better or worse, more or less desirable.”⁷

The contributors to this issue of *Junctures* all, in their diverse fields of inquiry, make their own judgements of judgement, while advocating a certain suspension of judgement that allows time and space for constructive possibilities to emerge from unprepossessing and complicated situations. Having initiated the theme for this issue and received submissions that were without exception heading in directions utterly surprising to me, it would be a neat—and nasty—trick to play if I now subjected them to unalloyed editorial critique. Perhaps I am not the adversarial academic I once was, but it seems more fitting to let them be, to linger, feel, observe, reflect, connect ... and to leave them in your hands.

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1. See Kai Syng Tan, *Neuro-Futurism and Re-Imagining Leadership* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).
2. Lucy Lippard, "Projecting a Feminist Criticism," *Art Journal* 35, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 338.
3. Ngahiraka Mason, "Open for interpretation: The Art of Reuben Paterson," *Art New Zealand*, no. 116 (Spring 2005): 105.
4. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 246.
5. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).
6. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: England: Harvard University Press, 1988).
7. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in Janell Watson, "On Free-Wheeling Careers: An Interview with Barbara Herrnstein Smith," *Minnesota Review*, no. 80 (2013): 68.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PAINTING

INTRODUCTION

Painting is a multi-dimensional practice, including both four-dimensional and five-dimensional qualities.¹ These dimensions are active through pictorial forces within the ground of a painting—an interface that Antonin Artaud called the subjectile, a conjunction of the words subject and projectile.² The current embrace of materiality and vitalism within contemporary art practices locally and internationally,³ draws attention to place-based relationships with biological and geological matter that traverse colonial dualities and categorisations of nature and culture.⁴ Further understanding of multi-dimensional and more-than-human approaches to painting can be developed through extension of Artaud's ideas, using the subjectile to consider biological and geological figure/ground dynamics and forces. This article extends Artaud's ideas by proposing the terms biosubjectile and geosubjectile to consider paintings and their surfaces as both living and inorganic systems. I reflect on my own bio and geo-based artworks, which generate multi-dimensional and polymorphic forms with a view to resisting or complicating both subjective experience and objective judgements of pictorial resolution, craft and aesthetics.

PICTORIAL SPACE

This paper develops a vitalist understanding of painting and pictorial space that expands consideration of Antonin Artaud's subjectile, along with the 'pictorial forces' observed by Artaud and later by German-American modernist painter Hans Hofmann.⁵ Hofmann promoted the terms 'push' and 'pull' to talk about the *expanding and contracting forces* within figure/ground dynamics. He focuses on geometric elements and colour as the 'carriers' of these forces. Although Hofmann encourages sympathetic or empathetic approaches, acknowledging that forces have spiritual dimensions, he leaves many other possible material, physical, contextual, energetic, alchemical, biological, and procedural features ripe for discussion as carriers of pictorial force and escape from the dualism of figure/ground.

"The picture should be alive, the statue should be alive and every work of art should be alive." Hofmann's provocation here is full of vitalist potential. His students are

encouraged to 'feel into' both animate and inanimate things, albeit with a narrowing sense of purpose—to 'civilise' the nation. Contemporary visual artists who, like Hofmann, choose to work within the continuums of abstraction offer new understandings of vitalist engagement with pictorial forces and the politics of their aesthetic impacts. Current forms of vitalism are influenced by anti-colonial and Indigenous thinking, along with ecology and materiality-focused theories such as those of Gilles Deleuze and Jane Bennett.⁶ This vitalism moves beyond the dualisms of physical/spiritual or human/non-human that Hofmann's sympathetic mode retains and destabilises the assumed anthropocentric authorship of artworks.

Contemporary bio-based materials (marketed as 'new' sustainable materials) are often porous and membrane-like. In art making, their porosity and sensitivity expose different pictorial forces, and provoke use of techniques, tools and working methods that encourage empathetic material approaches⁷ and regenerative practices. This generates a need for reassessment of the scope and judgement of aesthetics, craft and value. Experimentation with pictorial forces and their carriers is one of the ways that artists have resisted the conventions and strictures of pictorial temporality, organisation and evaluation, whether their substrate is a porous piece of paper, a canvas or a rockface.

Artaud referred to the creative interface of an artwork as the subjectile—a conjunction of the words subject and projectile, the boundary or threshold where pictorial forces intersect. Ros Murray writes of the agency of 'betrayal' that Artaud gives the subjectile: "The first time Artaud uses the word it is in a letter to André Rolland in 1932: 'Ci-inclus un mauvais dessin où ce que l'on appelle le subjectile m'a trahi' (I'm including a bad drawing in which what is called the subjectile has betrayed me)."⁸ Jacques Derrida explained that, for Artaud, "The subjectile here appears almost as a subject that is capable of betraying the artist; the drawing is bad because the surface on which it was created had an active role, rather than simply being an inert, blank page."⁹

In the 1920s and 30s, the term 'subjectile' was picked up and used predominantly in reference to the material surface or ground of a painting or drawing. But this interface could also be less material, unbounded and transitive. For example, Derrida interpreted the subjectile as simultaneously "the throw and the thrown." In material terms, he described it as "a sort of skin with holes for pores," historically, and perhaps persistently, devalued because "we oppose just those subjectiles that let themselves be traversed (we call them porous, like plasters, mortar, wood, cardboard, textiles, paper)."¹⁰

For Artaud, the vitalism and material agency of pictorial forces were directly linked to earth and nature, and although his writings preceded Hofmann's popularisation of the terms 'push' and 'pull' within painting, those terms are also used to identify geomorphic forces that drive Earth's processes of erosion, deposition, sedimentation, deformation and the extreme pressures involved in metamorphism. Artaud thought of the subjectile as the space where work occurs, where matter is 'volatilised' and where the form of a 'work' emerges through processes of force that are connected to Earth.¹¹

I interpret the subjectile as an interface where creative incidents or events take place. Within this subjectile interplay, there are a series of events between subjective and objective modes. This occurs within particular conditions and material assemblages, with a range of agencies and forces at work. Agents include the artist and their audience



Figure 1. *Autumn Sunday* (2018), still shot from stop-motion animation. The substrate is a mix of agar and cellulose. Made at Enough Room for Space in Drogenbos, Belgium. Edited as a music video for William Henry Meung's track *Autumn Sunday* in 2019 by Jo Sanders.



Figure 2. *Greywacke love poems: returns* (2019). Snails inhabit the bacterial polyester painting that coats a boulder at the old Owhiro Bay quarry site. Although the snails do not physically alter the paint material, they do alter the composition of the artwork as an assemblage. The snails were likely attracted to pockets or folds within the bioplastic that had trapped moisture.

or actors within a social context, along with more-than-human agencies like microbial organisms, weather and the atmosphere of the social and physical world. Material scientists might call these conditions 'interfacial forces,' where conflict or stress play out in generative ways, altering the material structure or object as it forms.¹²

Later in this article I use a posthumanist lens to propose biological and geological subjectiles that might host the kinds of pictorial forces associated with multispecies assemblages theorised by Donna Haraway.¹³ An example of a biosubjectile might be as simple as a painting made through more-than-human mark making or figuration within a biofilm (a live microbial assemblage that has formed a layer or coating). But we could also consider the biosubjectile at work within a city, where elemental and human forces come together to channel wind through human-made structures and streets, bouncing off walls, depositing microbial spores onto their surfaces and painting the city with algal growth. Rock walls painted by the wind also invoke a geosubjectile at work within the geological formation of stone, involving the push and pull of processes that earlier deposited sedimentary substrates over extended periods of geologic time.¹⁴ Geomorphic forces of compression prepare sediments to become stone, aggregate blocks or cast planes.

The ongoing anthropogenic geology of the city also invokes forces of labour and socio-political power structures. And as artists work with biological and geological materials and forces, the artwork itself may contribute to ongoing processes of anthropogenic and transhuman biology and geology, including the creation of biomorphic and geomorphic forms that expand on established visual abstractions and representations.¹⁵ These creative activities also invoke practices beyond art making, including the extractive injustice and racialised violence associated with ongoing colonial capitalism, enslavement and forced labour. The work of Otobong Nkanga, Yvette Mutumba, Donna Haraway and Kathryn Yusoff offers examples of recent creative practice and writing that consider the past and present of extractive human activities within the biosphere and geosphere.¹⁶

In the bio-based polymer artworks discussed in this article, the paint material is its own substrate and its own ground. This means that the power dynamics and duality of passive or active ground are embedded within the painting material itself; the figure is already working from within the ground, and vice versa. In humid conditions, cellulose paint material can also become a biofilm, supporting the growth of lifeforms and biomorphic figurations.

I link pictorial forces and the subjectile to multi-dimensional qualities of painting.¹⁷ Beyond two-dimensional visual language, there are a range of ways that multi-dimensional time, duration and energy transfer can be seen within the activities and materials of painting. This includes four-dimensional (temporal) and five-dimensional (energetic) qualities.

FIGURE/GROUND

My own understanding of figure/ground dynamics and pictorial forces is particular to Aotearoa New Zealand art education within university art schools during the early 2000s. My experience was that international influences from social practice and site-responsive approaches to art making intersected with the beginnings of personal, ongoing, learning about Tangata Tiriti (non-Māori people) relationships with place and Te Taiao (the natural world).¹⁸ These intersecting paradigm shifts influenced my understanding of painting and abstraction, particularly in the relationships between site-responsive approaches and various forms of provisional and transitive practices that drew international attention during the 2000s.¹⁹ The context of Aotearoa continues to inform my curiosity about how painting practices are altered through place-based relationships and anti-colonial critiques that destabilise hierarchies of knowledge, materials, conceptual frameworks, representation and judgements of value and craft.

More recently, a decentering of colonial art paradigms has occurred in interaction with the paradigm shifts of new materialist philosophies. Particular artists and art theorists are grappling with their understanding of more-than-human relationships—in ways that are not new to many Indigenous world views.²⁰ Within these ontological shifts in ways of being—and being in relationship—I'm curious about reconsiderations of the more-than-human figure/ground dynamics and pictorial forces that are possible or already present within painting.

A new materialist consideration of figure/ground relationships can be brought into conversation with historical materialism through the writing of Nancy Fraser, who uses the structures of Early Modern pictorial space as a metaphor to describe capitalist systems. Fraser notes that ontological divisions are fundamental to both colonisation and capitalism, where there are pre-existing but massively intensified separations between a (nonhuman) 'natural' background and an apparently nonnatural 'human' foreground.²¹ In Fraser's description, the forces and divisions within the pictorial space or 'stage' of capitalism are not limited to a simple binary of figure and ground relationships. The legibility and differentiation of figure and ground is unstable, and the agents and formations of productive and reproductive labour are recognised and rewarded in different ways at various times. The pictorial space of colonial capitalism morphs, mutates and decomposes, depending on how specific communities and societies choose to represent labour and production.

Fraser's thinking has informed how I think about the role of bio-based materials and aesthetics within 'just transitions' towards circular bioeconomy models. These economic models reconfigure evaluation of costs and value/s, material relationships within natural and cultural contexts as well as systems of production and profit distribution.²² Artworks that use these materials contribute to the development of biobased aesthetics that add and shape value.²³

Over recent decades, many artists have been moving away from petrochemical materials and extractive modes of material relationship, making and seeking out materials that are produced using more symbiotic and sympoietic (making-with) approaches.²⁴ This is evident in the past thirty years of bioart practices that have intersected with ongoing experimental and DIY material practices that in turn grew out of earlier twentieth century process-based work, coinciding with environmental and circular economy movements.²⁵

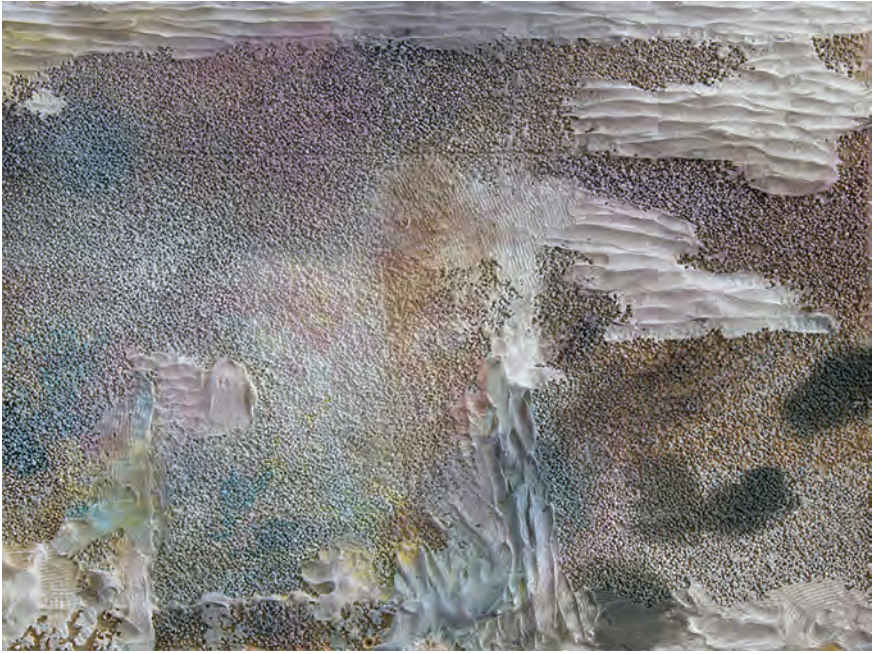


Figure 3. Untitled painting made in 2001 during BFA study, sandpaper, plaster, polyfilla™, and watercolour on panel.

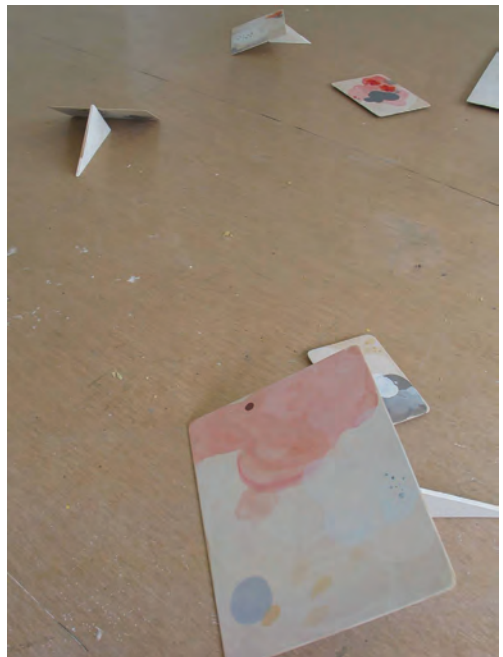


Figure 4. Untitled self-supporting paintings made in 2004 during BFA study.

Studying in the early 2000s, access to digital image-making technologies like Photoshop enabled experimentation with the layering and manipulation of images and 'paint' transparency. The profusion of layers and capacity to project these layers within a photograph of a site, or into actual physical space using a projector, carried over into physical approaches to paint-handling on canvas, panel, wall and floor. Increasingly, artists engaged in playful experimentation in which tensions between 'human' gesture and the emerging digital aesthetics could be teased out and explored.²⁶ I began a series of reconfigurable and 'self-supporting' paintings with translucent washes and fleeting glyphic gestures that moved across the surface and involved unstable figure/ground relationships (Figure 4). I later understood this 'incidental' mark-making in relation to theories of provisional, indexical and transitive visual languages.²⁷ The works were made of thin fibreboard (MDF) that was freely available from hardware stores where it was used as cover sheets for other construction materials. I used full sheets 'arced' in tension, held by friction with the studio carpet to become self-supporting, while other panels were cut down and shaped into the format of laptop screens, a shape that became a novel feature of everyday life and a newly portable interface with the digital sphere.

Working as a high school art teacher in Wellington (2007–2011), I worked on the walls and floor tiles of the Lyall Bay Studios building (Figures 5 and 6). Installations like *Landing* (2008), *Waterwall* (2009), *Transparencies* (2011) and *Glover Park Daybeds* (2011) developed from this time. In playful studio work, an accident or mistake becomes a tool for invention in the creative process and in language, mediating rifts between rational and irrational forms of knowledge production and expanding the range of 'craft.'²⁸

Subsequently, in my large studio at VCUArts in Richmond Virginia, I made quick-fire wall paintings, progressively redacting them with white petrochemical 'latex' house paint in fast succession. This resulted in a happy accident of 'delaminated' paint, with several layers beginning to peel off the wall in sheets (Figure 7). With further experimentation, I began engineering these delaminations so that the material could extend out into space while staying attached to the wall, extending existing metal conduits within the space to create supports, seen in works like *Untitled* (2012) (Figure 8). The moments of transition between surface and material were compelling. These works produced a different range of figure/ground relationships within spatial installations and wall works, including 'inside-out' paintings where underpainted images were revealed through peeling. The material precarity and time-based processes of gravity also generated four-dimensional possibilities within pieces like *Room 306b* (2012) and *Dayfolder* (2013).

These paintings came out of a conceptual interest in the possibility of making a painting that could rehydrate and have a circular material transformation—the desire to make a painting that could then become liquid again. However, the works generated a lot of waste and were dependent on the petrochemical paint industry. This prompted me to find out more about polymers that are generated from plants, algae and bacterial sources, some of which can be used as water-soluble paint binders. During 2016, I worked to develop this 'hydrophilic' (water loving) paint and used it within durational installations and to invoke time-based biomorphic grafting and growth within the exhibition space (Figures 9 and 10).



Figure 5. Untitled studio work on the wall at Lyall Bay Studios, 2008.
Watercolour, acrylic wash and paper glued to the wall and torn away.



Figure 6. Untitled studio work made on the wall and floor at Lyall Bay Studios, 2008. Acrylic wash and paper.



Figure 7. Untitled studio work made with delaminated acrylic latex paint on the studio walls at VCUArts, 2012.



Figure 8. Untitled studio work at VCUArts that involved additional metal conduit, 2012.



Figure 9. *Medium (reconfigured)*, (2016-2017). A durational and reconfigurable cellulose-based biopolymer installation made over nine months while I was at the Jan van Eyck Academy in the Netherlands. Cellulose is a biopolymer that can be derived from algae, plants or kombucha SCOBY.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PAINTING

In this section, I return to discussion of the multi-dimensional qualities of painting and the forms that are generated through attention to time-based and energetic possibilities of the medium. I'm particularly interested in how these qualities are associated with biomorphic (biological), geomorphic (geological), hydromorphic (liquid) and polymorphic (diverse) forms. These shapes, patterns and material assemblages infer multi-dimensional movement, growth and transitions between physical and psychic states.

Four-dimensional (time-based) painting can develop polychronic and anachronic characteristics, with many things happening at once within an artwork or exceeding the boundaries of its own chronological moment. This holds some similarities to non-linear perceptions of time within Indigenous artmaking. Five-dimensional (energetic) qualities of a painting can be present physically within the radiation of pigments and psychologically within the affective energies (and 'vibes') that are involved in creation and encounter.²⁹

Multi-dimensional qualities are present within many customary artforms, including in Scotland, Ireland and England where my own ancestors came from.³⁰ Modernist movements also produced artworks that reference biomorphic and geomorphic forms and processes that were inherently time-based and inferred lively energetic forces. Multi-dimensional qualities were explicitly recognised in art nouveau, impressionism, cubism and the fascist-aligned movements of futurism and Lucio Fontana's *spatialismo*.³¹ Within later twentieth century process-based practices, composting, sedimentation and erosion, entropy and ruin, transfer, transformation and creative destruction are multi-dimensional processes that complicate dominant perceptions of time, energy and art



Figure 10. *Untitled* (2017). Part of the group exhibition *The Fox and The Grapes*, Kunstvereniging Diepenheim , 2017.

experiences.³² Examples include Jay DeFeo's durational work *The Rose* 1958-1966), Gustav Metzger's acid paintings, such as *Recreation of First Public Demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art* (1960, remade 2004, 2015), Gordon Matta Clark's agar work *The Land of Milk and Honey*, part of the larger in-extant series *Museum* (1969), Andy Warhol's urine-induced *Oxidation Paintings* (1977) and Helen Chadwick's actively composting vitrine-like sculpture *Carcass* (1986).

The provocation to think about a painting as four or five-dimensional allows us to recognise that images remain fluid even once the paint has dried. Material, signification and interpretation continue to change and circulate through time. This way of thinking about any artform enables reinterpretation by extending time and space for playful subjectivity and intersubjectivity when engaging with objects, sites, relationships and inheritances. Playful approaches to the material processes of painting holds ground for the medium to 'play out', incidents to occur and for processes of 'tinkering' and 'hacking' to alter relationships and formations within the pictorial forces at work.³³

Time-based and intersubjective social relationships involve a 'resocialisation' of painting—not new, but a continuation of what painting has always been capable of doing through presence in public space and through intergenerational practices and relationships. These social dimensions are present within twenty-first century theories, including transitive, indexical, transitional and reparative qualities that enable painting to move between media, sites, situations, communities and contexts.³⁴

In my own work, the place-based and four-dimensional qualities of bio-based materials became more explicit after my MFA study. This developed into my Massey University doctoral work at Scion, a Crown Research Institute in Rotorua, with a range of thermoplastic bacterial polyester materials developed for *Greywacke love poems: returns* (2019) (Figure 2; Figure 12). This project began as a Wellington City Council Public Art Panel commission for the Owhiro Bay Quarry beachfront on the South Coast of Te Whanganui-a-Tara. The quarry began in the nineteenth century, with greywacke aggregate from beach shingle and the quarry face displaced into roading, foundations and building materials throughout the city.

Both the cellulose and bacterial polyester materials use greywacke pigments to produce a range of greys and oxidised oranges, while a complementary colour palette is generated with use of additional mineral, plant, and synthetic pigments that have ecological and art historical resonances, like the calcite used in gesso (a biogenic substance which eventually sediments, sequestering carbon and becoming chalk rock).

The three phases of *Greywacke love poems: returns* include the April 2019 lightbox installation in Pōneke's Courtenay Place—along reclaimed land on what was the foreshore—and the November 2019 installation of biodegradable paintings back out at Te Kopahou Reserve on the old quarry beachfront. In 2021 this project was reconfigured for the exhibition component of my PhD at Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery, as part of the group exhibition *Listening Stones Jumping Rocks*, curated by Sophie Thorn and Su Ballard (Figures 13 and 14). This version reconstituted materials produced during the earlier phases, grafting them into the lower level of the Adam gallery stairwell walls as an architectonic skin. This relocation of the work recognised the displacement and ongoing presence of materials from the Owhiro Bay quarry face into the city where it was



Figure 11. *Greywacke love poems: returns* (2019), hydrophilic cellulose grafted onto driftwood and boulder in the carpark at the old Owhiro Bay quarry site. Cellulose can be derived from algae, wood-derived cellulose or kombucha SCOBY, as a medium that is amphiphilic – both hydrophilic and hydrophobic (water loving, and water shy). It has the capacity to rehydrate and 'self-heal' tears, and to support biological activity.



Figure 12. *Greywacke love poems: returns* (2019), bacterial polyester paint moulded around a boulder in the old quarry carpark. The same piece of material features again in Figure 14.



Figure 13. *Greywacke love poems: returns* (2019-2021), materials from the 2019 installations reconstituted as an architectonic skin as part of *Listening Stones Jumping Rocks*, Adam Art Gallery, 2021.



Figure 14. *Greywacke love poems: returns* (2019-2021), detail image of thermoplastic used at the quarry site, heated and reconfigured in a variance of shape memory within the Adam Art Gallery stairwell space.

used throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries within building foundations and roadways of the city, remaining visible in many older kerbstones and gutter ways. *Biobitumen a Greywacke love poem* (2019) (Figure 15), made for the Circuit Festival, was situated in a Newtown gutter that is likely made of Owhiro Bay aggregate.

The stairwell iteration of the work was located as the base layer of the curatorial construct; it became a shifting sedimentary ground and substrate within visitors' own figurative experiences of the group exhibition. Within the composition of the cellulose adhering to the stairwell surfaces, derangement and decomposition allowed fragmented figuration to destabilise a static gestalt. The 1960s stairwell wall was historically an exterior wall, integrated into the interior architecture of the new Adam Art Gallery building in 1999. It is a site of exchange between dimensions and boundaries of above and below, inside and outside, past and present. Such interfaces within the physical world can be understood in analogy with the creative subjectile.

Multidimensional painting produces forms that are contingent and unstable. Visual psychologists describe 'multi-stable' polymorphic forms and phenomena, including pareidolia, the recognition of an animate or representational form within a geomorphic rock or atmospheric cloud formation. Biomaterials often lend themselves to taking on unstable geomorphic, biomorphic and hydromorphic forms, resonating with the organisms and geologies that their substances originate from and remaining sensitive to environmental conditions and processes.

The plant-based and bacterial polyester thermoplastics developed at Scion also have capacity for polymorphous 'shape memory'; they can be moulded into one shape at a particular temperature and then reheated and deformed into another shape. When it is



Figure 15. *Biobitumen a Greywacke love poem* (2019), temporary site-specific intervention made several days before the Circuit Festival began. This action was filmed in digital format by Rachel O'Neill and edited into a moving image work by Johanna Sanders. During the festival, the video featured on a monitor in a nearby Newtown storefront, along with remnants of the gutter work that were reconfigured for the indoor space.

reheated a third time, back to the initial temperature, it remembers the prior moulded shape. In shape memory, heat (and moisture) can become triggers for four-dimensional bio-material memory, akin with human muscle memory or the physiological and psychological experiences of neural plasticity, where pathways within the brain can be established and/or reorganised under particular conditions.³⁵

American artist Lynda Benglis' use of poured paint and latex invites a multi-dimensional perception of painting and gesture, with attempts to understand this through the physics of material movements that are involved in geological and geomorphic processes. Benglis' work has been interpreted by physicists who have analysed the material flows and cantilevers in her artworks, where there is interaction and intra-action of forces like gravity.³⁶ Robert Smithson's work also provides examples of the geosubjectile in action. Smithson's *Glue Pour* (1979) exchanged Helen Frankenthaler and Lynda Benglis' paint tins for a can of glue, poured down a clay bank. Smithson was attempting to develop an 'erosional aesthetics,' recognising the violence and energetic material shifts of entropy within geological time.³⁷

BIOLOGICAL AND GEOLOGICAL SUBJECTILES

As described earlier in the paper, for Artaud, the subjectile is where matter is 'volatilised' and form emerges through processes of force that are connected to Earth and 'nature'.³⁸

The concept already suggested an interface that goes beyond the human. Artaud and his contemporary Georges Bataille made work that recalibrated their material relationships, contributing to a liberatory and emancipatory politics where the hierarchies and status of matter were challenged. Bataille's base materialism was a provocation for reevaluation of materials and the thresholds between high and low.³⁹



Figure 16. A photograph of rehydrated cellulose after a night of rain, as part of *Greywacke love poems: returns* (2019).



Figure 17. *Hydrophillia and the Love Seat*, partially rehydrated cellulose on a driftwood 'love seat' on the beach in front of the old Owhiro Bay quarry site after a night of rain. When rehydrated, the cellulose became very similar to the seaweed (a cellulosic plant).

In the work of the politically-engaged American artist Nancy Spero from the late 1960s and early 1970s, the subjectile enabled painting to move beyond dominant semiotic and symbolic orders, including a phallogocentric field of vision that privileged singular and vertical elements and frames. Lucy Bradnock writes that Spero's feminist interest in Artaud explored "insertion of the body into the linguistic order, the dislocation of meaning and the destruction of the self, that Spero would discover in the 'fissured, deteriorating, petrifying, liquefying, coagulating, empty, impenetrably dense' mind of Artaud."⁴⁰ This aligns with my own thinking about the figurations that emerge from decomposition in the Adam Art Gallery work, along with the part of the stairwell installation that became known as 'The Oyster,' for its yonic qualities.

Contemporary bioart and biological painting that reconstitutes waste materials align with aspects of Bataille's base materialism, tempered through new materialist understanding of biological, physical and vitalist agency (including pseudo-agency). The materialism of bioart is influenced by feminist practices of the 1970s, where embodied knowledge and subjectivities were explored in relationship with beings and environments beyond the self. For Bataille and Roland Barthes, base and superstructure exist in material entanglement, as base matter is active and does not stay put within a binary of high and low. This base entanglement risks overburdening the affective potential of matter with a revolutionary intent, but can still provide "a cultural medium to carry the contagion of base matter, in the same way that a virus or a bacterium are grown and developed ... [as] an infectious thought."⁴¹

In a 2018 article, "Biosemiotics and Phenomenology," Morten Tønnessen et al. ask whether there is phenomenology beyond the human.⁴² They note Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion of flesh and skin as a corporeal and metaphorical boundary and threshold between human and more-than-human sensory experiences. This could be human skin or skins more generally, whether they be biologically specific (attached and living as part of a particular organism) or detached as waste (circulating in the material world, transferring energy or becoming assemblages).

Revisiting the subjectile with a new materialist and posthumanist lens on subjectivity, we can acknowledge the liveness of this interface, including the possibility of more-than-human subjectivities and energies. A more symbiotic biological or geological subjectile becomes a site of human and more-than-human assembly, agency and image making, with recognition of more-than-human intersubjectivity (shared experiences) and subjectivity (personal experiences) beyond the human. This complicates assumptions about the stasis of pictorial space, authorship and figure/ground relationships. It also emphasises visible and invisible systemic processes like diffraction, aggregation, action and intra-action of matter within the composition of images and surfaces.⁴³ As I have written elsewhere:

Paintings are one of many potential aggregates, operating as microbial biofilms —anthropogenic or otherwise. Biofilms are slimy, cumulative, and often hospitable communities of living and dead matter that adhere to surfaces over time: coating pebbles in a riverbed; arterial walls; cave walls; abattoir floors, and our teeth. Within these biofilms, surface active agents (surfactants), alter interfacial and surface tension, influencing initial aggregation of the film, and future changes.⁴⁴

Historical and ongoing examples of biologically active paintings include the Gwion Gwion rock paintings, made 12,000 years ago by the Ngarinyin-speaking people of Wilinggin country in the Kimberley area of Western Australia, now hosting cyanobacteria and fungi that produce continuous restoration of the images. These are surfaces that hold intergenerational and symbiotic qualities, prompting speculative discussion about paintings as living systems.⁴⁵

In biogenic image-making processes, trace and indexical mark making work at a molecular and biological level as microbes make marks in many ways. Biological and ecological activity is also seen in the agar substrates of Alexander Fleming's bacterial paintings (c. 1920s); Gordon Matta Clark's *The Land of Milk and Honey* (1969); Liz Larner's *Culture* (c. 1987); and Anika Yi's *You Can Call Me F* (2015). These paintings and artworks become temporary living systems—not only representations, but pictorial spaces where 'another world is possible' through processes of multispecies 'worlding' and sympoetic kinship.⁴⁶ The phrase 'another world is possible' invokes the use of imagination within contemporary crises and the alter-globalisation movements that try to demonstrate the possibility of 'other worlds.'⁴⁷ Artists manipulate affects and narratives to influence our imaginaries every day, contributing to this sense of what is possible beyond the status quo. The works listed above extend this within a biological subjectile.

Antonin Artaud's liberatory idea of the 'body without organs'⁴⁸ can be used as a tool for considering the fluid materiality of paintings that are unbounded by representational 'organs.' These bodies without organs extend beyond the surrealist approach, with which Artaud was associated, via the materiality of fluid mediums used by American colour field painter Helen Frankenthaler, who acknowledged the influence of surrealism (if not Artaud) through her teacher Rufino Tamayo. Engagement with the contingency of paint as a medium can be seen in Frankenthaler's soak-stain method and in Lynda Benglis' pour processes (*Blatt*, 1969). Both artists used fluidity to resist pictorial organisation and individual gestures or strokes. Many of their works feature largely unmodulated and decompartmentalised compositions, where paint fluids move freely. "I realized that the idea of directing matter logically was absurd," Benglis has said. "Matter can and will take its own form."⁴⁹

Artaud wrote about the materiality of Vincent van Gogh's painting in his essay "Van Gogh, The Man Suicided by Society," which circulated widely in the mid-late 1960s, influencing artists like Clyfford Still and Carolee Schneemann.⁵⁰ In this essay, Artaud describes what we might now talk about as more-than-human relationships with both nature and the materials of painting: "Van Gogh is a painter because he recollected nature, because he reperspired it and made it sweat, because he squeezed onto his canvases in clusters, in monumental sheaves of color, the grinding of elements that occurs once in a hundred years ... ocular collisions taken from life, blinkings taken from nature, have the luminous currents of the forces which work on reality."⁵¹

As living matter becomes non-living matter (and vice versa), the cellular becomes the extracellular, moving beyond the confines of an individual organism. Agency within Artaud and Bataille's work is often linked to such processes of transition and energy transfer between living and non-living things. This agency happens (and is observed) within processes of differentiation and within human and more-than-human excretion

and separation. Bataille writes: “The notion of the (heterogeneous) foreign body permits one to note the elementary subjective identity between types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, faecal matter) ... a half-decomposed cadaver fleeing through the night in a luminous shroud.”⁵²

The paint films I created using bio-based polymers for the exhibition *Not standing still* (2018) (Figure 18) at Blue Oyster Art Project Space in Dunedin, and for the music video *Autumn Sunday* (2018) (Figure 1), contain both living and non-living matter. In the untitled work made for *Not standing still* (2018), wood-derived cellulose and calcite created a medium for biofilm growth of marine algae cultures, a composite of terrestrial and aquatic origins. This biofilm quickly failed, dehydrating into dead algae matter that lent a leather-like strength to some parts of the material. Other parts became porous through a pseudo-biomineralisation process, as seawater reacted to calcite pigments and cellulose, precipitating salty crystals.



Figure 18. *Untitled* (2018), made for the Blue Oyster Project Space exhibition, *Not standing still*.



Figure 19. Documentation of the gel casting process while making the work for Blue Oyster. Live seaweed culture was added to the cellulose medium.

To understand the forms of language that appear within a biological or geological subjectile, we can look to semiosis. Artworks that are 'grown' biologically and/or geologically become sites of biosemiosis and geosemiosis, where meaning-making and signalling emerge within 'live' biological and geological processes.⁵³ For example, this occurs during the formation of biofilms and sediments, signalling that a surface has become a hospitable environment for other organisms or is stable enough for the accumulation of matter. Very basic signals between microbial organisms can work like signs or 'proto signs.'

Biosemiotics and geosemiotics can be seen as part of what Emily Apter describes as planetary aesthetics. This expands semiotic signals and relational interfaces into a cosmological frame,⁵⁴ with a planetary level of semiosis present within the visual languages of biologically active paintings, or in the interactions of biological and geological matter that occur within the calcifications of artworks by artists like Glasgow-based Ilana Halperin (notably the ongoing *Physical Geology* series, including *The Hall of Rocks and Minerals*, 2014).

Greywacke love poems: returns (2019–2021) (Figures 13 and 14) used bio-based materials at a large scale in a series of installations. In these works, material becomes both figure and ground, medium and support. This means that the figure is already working from within the ground, and vice versa. In more recent work, I have been thinking about how these figure/ground dynamics lead to multi-dimensional semiotics, as when paint materials, biosemiosis and geosemiosis come together within the time-based and energetic, biogenic (biologically driven) oxidation of pigments.

Autumn Sunday (2018) (Figure 1) is an animation made with photographs of biologically active paintings created at the Enough Room for Space residency in Drogenbos, near Brussels. The agar and cellulose medium was cast in sheets and exposed within the Senne valley, known for the *Brettanomyces Bruxellensis*, a wild yeast. The yeast spores became agents within the biofilm, creating biomorphic fungal growth patterns across the biological subjectile. The atmospheric and biological sensitivity of the cellulose/agar biofilm is analogous to the light sensitivity of celluloid film, measuring or graphing the drift and 'exposure' of the yeasts, creating a 'biograph.'

Apter's concept of planetary aesthetics provokes speculation about how biosemiotic and geosemiotic signalling might generate material archives within the cosmological framework she has described.⁵⁵ In the larger pictorial space of planetary aesthetics, biopolymers like cellulose are found circulating within living and dead organisms. They are involved in processes of transfer and recordkeeping between land and sea, through biodegradation, sedimentation and air-sea exchange, cycles within the hydrosphere, atmosphere and lithosphere. Cellulose becomes a medium, carrier and binder of biosemiotic archives of many kinds, including interactions within energy and carbon cycles where particulate matter is quantitatively related to emissions. This is perhaps a more intimate level of planetary aesthetics. But perceived at the scale of atmospheric carbon exchange, it is part of a cosmological or planetary subjectile.

METABOLIC RIFTS IN THE PICTURE PLANE

Industrialisation altered human relationships with the materials they use in everyday creative activities, including art making. The current return to material practices and artist-made materials has resulted in a reconnection with and reimagining of what is materially possible in the world. Karl Marx's concept of 'metabolic rift' acknowledged the ways that colonial industrialisation separated nature and culture, town and country, human and non-human, contributing to social and ecological harm. His theorisation of this rift influenced George Bataille's base materialism.⁵⁶ Both biological and geological subjectiles offer themselves as sites for metabolic intersections, rather than metabolic rifts, offering conceptual tools that create opportunities to move through these rifts.

Within modernist vitalism, Wassily Kandinsky outlined a non-objective theory of the picture plane, beyond the conventions of pictorial space that Early Modern linear perspective had driven. For Kandinsky, glass windows were a metaphor for what he called the Basic Plane (BP), a "transparent, but definite glass-like partition, abolishing direct contact from within ... here, too, exists the possibility of entering art's message, to participate actively, and to experience its pulsating-life with all one's senses."⁵⁷ There is animism to Kandinsky's description of the elements of a painting, including this basic plane of activity: a point "digs itself into the plane and asserts itself for all time," and the BP is a "living being."⁵⁸ In the current moment of climate crises and conditions associated with the Anthropocene, speculative thinking about geological and biological subjectiles develops further understanding of pictorial spaces that approach Kandinsky's living partition in diverse ways, furthering a non-dualistic approach to nature and culture.



Figure 20. Work in progress toward an installation within the corridor windows of the Cockburn Geological Museum at University of Edinburgh, September 2025.



Figure 21. Work in progress toward an installation within the corridor windows of the Cockburn Geological Museum with Dr. Gillian McCay, curator of the Cockburn.

Posthuman and new materialist frameworks for painting can question anthropocentric approaches to retinal experience and viewpoints. Screen-based experiences of artworks and images of the world around us distance people from in-person experience of physical objects and sites, reinforcing a separation between nature and culture. However, there is also another kind of intimacy that is created through ease of access and the range of perspectives that are available through our fingertips. By experiencing the pictorial space of applications like Google Earth—celebrating its twentieth year in 2025—many contemporary artists have become accustomed to a more-than-human perspective. Roof-mounted cameras and satellites continue the work of nineteenth

century pigeons (who were made to carry cameras), and the digital picture plane allows us to zoom in and out, sharing the perspective of extra-terrestrials, rivers, herds of sheep and potentially insects. These are technological augmentations of day-to-day experience of urban environments and landscapes. Earth is now a blue marble that you can zoom back into and view from multiple viewpoints and multiple moments in time (past, present and arguably future—depending on your time zone). Hand-held glass windows in various forms enable interactive intervention in these images and have impacted the visual language of painting even when they are not the immediate source material or subject matter. I have spoken to several painters who have had similar experiences of catching themselves trying to use screen-based finger gestures to zoom into their physical drawings or paintings.

In contemporary practices, painting and drawing move freely between mediums, media, and within physical, biological and digital substrates. Artists have many ways of inhabiting, ‘subjecting’ and subjectifying the ground. But questions of figure and ground dynamics are still vitally important within pictorial and compositional systems that are used to make representations and abstractions in our image-laden world. These dynamics are also relevant to understanding bio-based substrates as ‘live’ subjectiles where subjectivity is present in human and more-than-human ways. This ongoing development of subjectivity may well be crucial to our future relationships and actions within the Earth systems that we live within.

The reach and distribution of a biological or geological subjectile is wide—in the manner of Timothy Morton’s hyperobjects—resisting various forms of centring, including the geographical and the human.⁵⁹ Cellulose, for example, is a hyperobject (or hypermedium) that moves between different spheres and between human and non-human production and creativity. Fossil-derived petrochemical microplastics are another example.⁶⁰ Our relationships with petrochemical plastics and waste are reasserted in a conversation between Tina Ngata (Ngāti Porou) and Max Liboiron (Métis), who note that even these plastics are derived from fossil ancestors at the in-between of biological and geological processes, and can therefore be considered kin.⁶¹ Making these connections also prepares us to reconsider the plasticity of our personal biological systems and relationships in the larger social, economic, and ecological systems that we are part of—not in rift or adrift from.

Thinking through the possibilities of metabolic intersections and interfaces in the subjectile, activates links between Bataille’s interest in the nineteenth century metabolic rift and the biological alter-globalisation described by French philosopher Catherine Malabou. For Malabou, the kinds of neuroplasticity that become possible during personal crises or physiological trauma enable alternative formations of consciousness at a biological level. This biological plasticity contributes to shifts in individual and collective consciousness that enable plasticity and transformation in social and political formations and movements. Like Bataille’s base materialism, Malabou’s biological alter-globalisation recalibrates our human and more-than-human connections within cycles of production and consumption, resisting the exclusionary impulse to separate ourselves from disorder and waste. For Malabou, disorder and waste present opportunities for plastic formation and reformation, whether that be at the scale of biological neuroplasticity or within larger social and ecological systems.⁶²

CONCLUSION

Art historical understanding of pictorial space often defaults to an Early Modern interpretation, constructed with background, mid-ground and foreground. In representational genres, the 'natural' is often pushed to the background with clear hierarchies and divisions between human and non-human features. Figure/ground dynamics and pictorial forces can reflect these hierarchical conventions, even within less representational imagery and more abstract painting.

Our understanding of interfaces within the physical (and conceptual) world is important for establishing and supporting systems that provide more equitable conditions for life. Surfaces and boundaries, the meeting point or interface for such symbiotic relations, and access to those interfaces—freedom of interaction.

This article has argued that pictorial space and subjectile space have always involved more-than-human agency. In academic contexts, the systems used to interpret paintings and images continue to prioritise human authorship and pictorial forces over more-than-human ones. This bias has an impact on our understanding of the relationships between materials and place, nature and culture, human and non-human, by entrenching binaries. In my own practice, and in interpreting work by a range of artists—including but not limited to those mentioned in this essay—I have found it useful to consider the possibilities of the terms biosubjectile and geosubjectile as creative interfaces that often intersect, enabling artists and audiences to understand pictorial forces beyond the human. These forms of subjectility can be understood within the context of multidimensional painting.

Beyond the scope of this paper, there is further work to be done understanding the biosubjectile and geosubjectile in relation to Deleuze's 'objectile,' an object that exists in the subjective imagination and in fiction, and that may well remain speculative or anticipatory, rather than materialising in the physical world. Examples include Alfred Jarry's pataphysical inventions, Paul Klee's *Twittering Machine* (1922) and Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915–23). These artworks bring together paradoxical materials and forms and/or, by way of their incomplete physical state, create anticipatory objects. Such speculations and anticipations are time-based, messing with past and present.⁶³

Raewyn Martyn is an artist from Aotearoa New Zealand, currently a lecturer and researcher in Fine Arts at University of Canterbury in Ōtautahi Christchurch. Her family arrived in Aotearoa during the 1860s, from the north and west of Scotland, Cornwall and Ireland. Raewyn's exhibition practice involves gallery and site-based work made in Aotearoa and internationally. Her site-responsive paintings and installations are composed during attentive occupation of particular situations. She thinks about how paintings can change through time, challenging the stability and temporality of painted surface, medium and site. Raewyn studied toward an MFA in Painting and Printmaking at VCUArts in Richmond VA. (2011–2013) and then worked as an assistant professor of visual arts at Antioch College in Ohio (2013–2016). She was a research participant at the Jan van Eyck Academy in the Netherlands (2016–2017) and completed a practice-based PhD at Toi Rāuwharangi College of Creative Arts, Massey University (2023).

1. Sabine Breitwieser, Branden W. Joseph, Mignon Nixon, Ara Osterweil, and Judith Rodenbeck, *Carolee Schneemann: Kinetic Painting*, (Munich: Prestel, 2015); Yin Ning Kwok, "A Five-Dimensional Approach to Conceptualizing the Interplay of Image, Emotions, and Senses," *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication* 3, no. 2 (2016).
2. Derrida writes: *The notion belongs to the code of painting and designates what is in some way lying below (sub= jectum) as a substance, a subject or a succubus. Between the beneath and the above, that is at once a support and a surface, sometimes also the matter of a painting or a sculpture, every-thing distinct from form, as well as from the sense and representation, which is not representable. Its presumed depth or thickness can only be seen as a surface, that of the wall or of wood, but already also that of paper, of textiles and of the panel.* Jacques Derrida and Mary Ann Caws, "Maddening the subjectile," *Yale French Studies* 84 (1994): 154-171.
3. For further context around vitalism and agential matter see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter : A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Jennifer L. Roberts, "Things: Material turn, transnational turn," *American Art* 31, no. 2 (2017): 64-69.
4. My understanding of nature and culture through the lens of new materialisms and Indigenous perspectives on the ontological turn have been informed by the following texts. Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, *New materialism: Interviews & cartographies*, (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012); Zoe Todd, "An indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism," *Journal of historical sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016): 4-22; Emilie Rākete, "In human: Parasites, posthumanism, and Papatūānuku," *The Documenta 14 Reader* (2016): 633-642; Christian Kock, "Burke on psychodynamic aesthetics: Forms that help us cope," *KB Journal* 12, no. 2 (2017); Ben Buchanan, "Moderne Theory mines indigenous knowledge, un ironically calls it 'post-human' or something," Ben Buchanan Art, blog post 20th September 2019 <https://benbuchanan.art.blog/2019/10/17/moderne-theory-mines-indigenous-knowledge-un-ironically-calls-it-post-human-or-something/>; Rosi Braidotti, "Affirmative ethics, new materialism and the posthuman convergence," in *Bridges to global ethics: Geoethics at the confluence of humanities and sciences*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023): 93-108.
5. For discussion of Artaud's pictorial forces, see J. Shaw, "Subjectility: On Reading Artaud," (PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2017): 21; 225; 235-236. Hans Hofmann's use of the terms push and pull are documented in recollections from former students and in his book Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real: and other Essays*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967): 44-45; 57. In his lectures on painting, Deleuze discusses painting 'forces' and paintings as assemblages that involve puissance (power of action & potential); germinal catastrophe and chaos; and foreign will. The most recent English translation was published after this essay was outlined and I would like to expand discussion of Deleuze and ideas within this paper in the future. Deleuze, Gilles. *On Painting: Courses, March-June 1981*. Edited by David Lapoujade. Translated by Charles J. Stivale. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2025); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

7. For further discussion of empathetic material processes see Quanta Gauld, "Empathy beyond the human: Interactivity and kinetic art in the context of a global crisis." *Technoetic Arts* 12, no. 2-3 (2014): 389-398. The influence of Wilhelm Worringer's writing is also relevant here: Worringer, Wilhelm. *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*. Translated by Michael Bullock. (New York: International Universities Press, 1953).
8. Ros Murray, *Antonin Artaud: The Scum of the Soul*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
9. Jacques Derrida and Mary Ann Caws. "Maddening the subjectile." *Yale French Studies* 84 (1994): 154-171.
10. Derrida and Caws.
11. See J. Shaw, "Subjectivity: On Reading Artaud," 21: 225; 235-236.
12. See Raewyn Martyn. "Surface Active Agents," *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* 45 (2018).
13. Along with writers like Anna Tsing and Jason Moore, Donna Haraway has playfully interrogated the term Anthropocene to specify the colonial and capitalist drivers of extractive human activities that have generated social and ecological crises. Haraway proposes the Chthulucene as an aspirational alternative for more symbiotic multispecies relationships in the past, present, and future. Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin." *Environmental humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 159-165.
14. The 2019 Greywacke Love Poems book includes an interview with Rachel O'Neill and discussion of 'sedimentary sight'. Raewyn Martyn, Rachel O'Neill, and Johanna Knox (Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Wellington City Council Public Art Panel, 2019).
15. In art history and visual art, 'biomorphic' and 'geomorphic' are terms for visual and material language that mimic or refer to forms and patterns found in 'nature'. Definitions of nature are complicated and contested, and in the twenty-first century, biotechnology and the anthropogenic impacts within 'nature' continue to challenge our understanding. Although biomorphic and geomorphic forms existed before modernism, they became common in artworks during that period, as artists met scientific knowledge, specimens, and models. Polymorphic and amorphous forms can be diversely related to referents within the natural world. Oliver Botar, "Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism," *Biomorphism*, (2016), Retrieved 10 Jan, 2025, from <https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/biomorphism>. doi:10.4324/9781135000356-REM770-1. In conversations about biomorphism, the boundaries of interspecies phenomenology and biosemiosis, have been critiqued due to associations with Nazi collaborator Jakob von Uexküll's theory of 'umwelt'—"self-centred world" within a specific environment (Cobley 2014, 348). Von Uexküll's commitment to identitarianism and nationalism led to the umwelt's use as justification of white supremacist and nationalist ideas of social order and belonging. The legacy of his work therefore involves deeper consideration of differences between inclusive and exclusive forms of belonging-with and becoming-with, within the phenomenological thresholds of subjectivity that we inhabit and share (Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988): 575-599; Wright (2014): 1). In the work of Hilda Hilst there is a life-giving nature of death, where negentropy and plasticity are found in hydromorphic and geomorphic imagery.
16. For discussion of Nkanga's work, see Yvette Mutumba, "Otobong Nkanga: Nothing Is Like It Seems, Everything Is Evidence," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 37 (2014): 52-59. As a white academic, Kathryn Yusoff builds off earlier work to develop her understanding of the racial violence associated with geography and geology Kathryn Yusoff, *Geologic Life: Inhuman Intimacies and the Geophysics of Race*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).
17. For further discussion of multidimensional qualities, the following texts are useful references. Linda Dalrymple Henderson provides background on the influence of different concepts of the fourth dimension, before and after Einstein's theories came to dominate theoretical definitions. She writes that late nineteenth century influences included concepts of the fourth dimension that involved higher spatial dimensions and states of consciousness. Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "The image and imagination of the fourth dimension in twentieth-century art and culture," *Configurations* 17, no. 1 (2009): 131-160.
18. My ancestors travelled from Scotland, Ireland, and England to arrive in Te Waipounamu, the southern island of New Zealand in the mid to late 19th century. Most of my family are tangata Tiriti—here because of the signing of the treaty of Waitangi.

19. Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," *Art in America* 97, no. 5 (2009): 122-135; David Joselit, "Painting beside itself," *October* 130 (2009): 125-134. Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting Part 2: to rest lightly on earth," *Art in America* 100 (2012): 78-85; Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, and Nikolaus Hirsch, eds., *Thinking through painting: Reflexivity and agency beyond the canvas*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012); Isabelle Graw, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, Carol Armstrong, Benjamin HD Buchloh, Sabeth Buchmann, René Démoris, David Joselit et al., *Painting beyond itself: The medium in the post-medium condition*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).
 20. Zoe Todd, "An indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn: 'Ontology', 4-22.; Emilie Råkete, "In human: Parasites, posthumanism, and Papatūānuku," 633-642; Christian Kock, "Burke on psychodynamic aesthetics: Forms that help us cope," *KB Journal* 12, no. 2 (2017); Ben Buchanan, "Moderne Theory mines indigenous knowledge, un ironically calls it 'post-human' or something."
 21. See Nancy Fraser, *Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
 22. Mario Pansera, Stefania Barca, Bibiana Martinez Alvarez, Emanuele Leonardi, Giacomo D'alisa, Teresa Meira, and Paul Guillibert, "Toward a just circular economy: conceptualizing environmental labor and gender justice in circularity studies," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 20, no. 1 (2024).
 23. Raewyn Martyn and Heather Galbraith. "Re-materialising: considering dominant understandings of value and systems of production within industrial plastics and the plastic arts," *Swamphen: a Journal of Cultural Ecology (ASLEC-ANZ)* 8 (2022).
 24. Donna Haraway, "Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene," In *Staying with the Trouble*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
 25. Robert E. Mitchell, *Bioart and the Vitality of Media*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).
 26. Liz Trospher, "Painting After the Digital Revolution," *Athenaeum Review*, Issue 2 (Summer 2019): 160-169. Internationally, this can be seen in development through the work of Laura Owens and Julie Mehretu, among others. The way that early 2000s digital aesthetics manifested within painting exhibits both similarities and differences from what developed within Net Art and lens-based print media.
 27. Raphael Rubenstein, "Provisional Painting," 122-135; "Provisional Painting Part 2: to rest lightly on earth," 78-85; David Joselit, "Painting beside itself," 125-134; Isabelle Graw, et al., *Painting beyond itself: The medium in the post-medium condition*; Gil Docking, Michael Dunn, and Edward Hanfling, *Two Hundred and Fifty Years of New Zealand Painting / Gil Docking; with Additions Covering 1970-1990 by Michael Dunn; and 1990-2020 by Edward Hanfling*, (Auckland: David Bateman, 2021).
 28. For further detail about the role of accident in Landing (2008), please see the online exhibition essay *Wish Accident* written by Rachel O'Neill (2008) for Enjoy Public Art Gallery.
 29. Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey, eds., *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology and Anachrony*, Routledge, 2018. Partha Mitter, "Colonial Modern: A Clash of Colonial and Indigenous Chronologies: The Case of India," In *Time in the History of Art*, 62-78, Routledge, 2018. Artist Richard Bowman wrote one of the few essays specifically about the early fluorescent paints he used to explore the five-dimensional possibilities of the light and radiation they emit: fluorescent enamel paint emitted "an actual, measurable energy from the canvas." "Radiant Abstractions Press Release," (2019), *The Landing*, <http://www.thelandinggalleries.com/radiant-abstractions-press-release>. Accessed 6 Aug. 2021.
- Vibrant matter and base materialism are also invoked in descriptions of Marie Menken's 1950's surrealist paintings and films. What is assumed as 'natural' is called into question, as Menken both observes and generates human and beyond-human forces. Her paintings were made using sand and other overtly geological materials like "stone chips, stone powders, marble chips, marble dust, ground silicate, sand, cement dust, luminous paints, glass particles, glues and lacquers, occasionally string and fiber," carrying geological time signatures. Menken also created swirling phosphorescent paintings that glowed in the dark. "Marie Menken at the Tate Modern," *More Milk Yvette, a Journal of the Broken Screen* (2008). <https://moremilkyvette.blogspot.com/2008/11/event-review-marie-menken-at-tate.html>.
- The psychic and energetic dimensions of painting within modernism are described in Brauer, Fae Brauer, Ed., *Vitalist modernism: art, science, energy and creative evolution*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023).

30. Tertia Barnett, Joana Valdez-Tullett, Linda Bjerketvedt, Fredrick Alexander, Stuart Jeffrey, Guillaume Robin, and Maya Hoole, "Prehistoric rock art in Scotland: Archaeology, meaning and engagement," (2021).
31. For further discussion of Fontana, see Zachary Small, "The Politics Behind the Massacred Canvases of Lucio Fontana," *Hyperallergic*, (2019, February 6). <http://hyperallergic.com/481104/the-politics-behind-the-massacred-canvas-of-lucio-fontana/> and also Anthony White, "Art Beyond the Globe: Lucio Fontana's Spatial Identity," *Electronic Melbourne Art Journal* 3, no. 1 (2008).
32. I would like to write further about decomposition, deformation, and derangement within contemporary painting practices, developing ideas from Bruno Latour (compositionism); Donna Haraway (composting), and Gilles Deleuze (deformation). Bruno Latour, "An attempt at a" compositionist manifesto", *New literary history* 41, no. 3 (2010): 471-490; Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin," *Environmental humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 159-165; Deleuze (2025).
33. Tinkering and hacking have a durational quality that enable iterative transformation to occur. See Tyson E. Lewis and Daniel Friedrich, "Educational states of suspension," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48, no. 3 (2016): 237-250; McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto*, (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 2004).
34. Miwon Kwon, *One place after another: Site-specific art and locational identity*, (Cambridge: MIT press, 2004); David Joselit "Painting beside itself," 125-134; Isabelle Graw, et al., *Painting beyond itself: The medium in the post-medium condition*.
35. Catherine Malabou, *Changing difference*, (Cambridge: Polity), 2011; Catherine Malabou, *What should we do with our brain?*, (New York: Fordham Univ Press, 2009).
36. Andrzej Herczyński, Claude Cernuschi, and Lakshminarayanan Mahadevan, "Painting with drops, jets, and sheets," *Physics Today* 64, no. 6 (2011): 31-36; "Whitney Focus presents Lynda Benglis," 2009, YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Yq7VklUHY18>; for further discussion of intra-action, see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway : Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
37. Adam Lauder, "Robert Smithson's Vancouver Sojourn: Glue Pour, 1970," *Canadian Art* 32 (2015): 90-94.
38. Jonathan Keith Shaw, "Subjectivity: On Reading Artaud."
39. Roland Barthes, "Mythologies: Selected and transl., from the French by Annette Lavers," (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972): 39-48.
40. Lucy Bradnock, *No more masterpieces: modern art after Artaud*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).
41. Noys, Benjamin. "Georges Bataille's base materialism." *Journal for Cultural Research* 2, no. 4 (1998): 499-517., pg 503.
42. Morten Tønnessen, Timo Maran, and Alexei Sharov. "Phenomenology and biosemiotics," *Biosemiotics* 11 (2018): 323-330.
43. Diffraction and intra-action of this kind are discussed by both Haraway and Barad. Haraway's chapter *The promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others*. can be found in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, *Cultural Studies*, (New York: Routledge, 1992). And Barad's explores these ideas further in Karen Barad. *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); and Karen Barad, "Diffracting diffraction: Cutting together-apart," In *Diffracted worlds-diffractive readings*, (London: Routledge, 2018), 4-23. See also, Anna Tsing, "More-than-human sociality: a call for critical description," In *Anthropology and nature* (Routledge, 2013): 27-42.
44. Raewyn Martyn, "Surface Active Agents" *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* 45, (2018).
45. Jeff Doring, "Gwion artists and Wunan Law: the origin of society in Australia," *Rock Art Research* 31, no. 1 (2014): 3-13; Mihnea Miran and Vincent WJ van Gerven Oei, eds. *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, Mousse Publishing, 2015. Paul Tacon, "Australian Pleistocene rock art," *Nature Human Behaviour* 5, no. 3 (2021): 301-302.
46. Haraway (2008).

47. Peter Lenco, *Deleuze and world politics: Alter-globalizations and nomad science*, (Routledge, 2013). Raewyn Martyn, "Adventure: Biopolymer Aesthetics and Empathetic Materialism—Another World is Possible," *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research* 3 (2021): 120-150.
48. Antonin Artaud, Tony MacGregor, and Norrie Neumark, *To have done with the judgement of God*, (KPFA Radio, 1965); Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*. Edited by Jack Hirschman. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965). Felix Guattari and Giles Deleuze, *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, *Trans. By Brian Massumi*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987).
49. Daniel Belasco, Carroll Dunham, and Elizabeth Hirsh, "The Heroine Paint" : After Frankenthaler, Edited by Katy Siegel (New York: Gagolian Gallery, 2015). Museum of Modern Art (New York. MoMA Highlights: 325 Works from the Museum of Modern Art. ABRAMS, 1999.
50. Lucy Bradnock, "No More Masterpieces", 9. Artaud's essay on van Gogh was first published in 1947. Antonin Artaud, et al., *To have done with the judgement of God*.
51. Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*.
52. Bataille (1985): 94.
53. Morten Tønnessen, et al., "Phenomenology and biosemiotics," 323-330.
54. Emily Apter, "Planetary dysphoria," *Third Text* 27, no. 1 (2013):135.
55. Apter (2013):135.
56. In my own work, poems become material within gel-cast cellulose artworks like *Howling Bawling* (2018), Martyn, Raewyn., & Lee, Aram. "On Riso, an interview" (2018). <https://walkerfalls.wordpress.com/2018-2019/> In *Greywacke love poems: returns* (2019-2021), the paintings become bio-based and circular archives as the artwork biodegrades. In *Paint over, use again* (2021), I traced text and images drawn by my late grandmother and developed techniques to embed and transfer these family archives within the curing bio-based paint film. As part of these projects, I have developed a range of improvised 'drying racks', or 'reproductive surfaces', that became printmaking devices.
57. Wassily Kandinsky and Hilla Rebay. *Point and line to plane*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1979).
58. Kandinsky (1979): 32; 116.
59. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
60. Clare Echterling, "Proliferation, Action: Marine Plastic Pollution, Material Agency, and Affective Representation," In *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts*, no. 19, (2014).
61. Max Liboiron and Tina Ngata, "Māori Plastic Pollution Expertise and Action in Aotearoa" (2020).
62. Catherine Malabou, *Changing difference*, 73; Catherine Malabou, *What should we do with our brain?*, 80-81. This adaptive plasticity and expression are akin to shape memory in bacterial biopolymers. The bacterial thermoplastic biopolymers, and polysaccharide blends used in *Greywacke Love Poems: Returns* (2019-2021), reconfigured through heat that can also trigger shape-memories at predetermined heat settings, revealing a plasticity that exists in recognition of a resiliency which involves flexibility but also resistance, deformation, reformation, reconfiguration and reproduction.
63. Jamie Brassett and John O'Reilly, eds., *A creative philosophy of anticipation: futures in the gaps of the present*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021). As with the bio and geosubjectile, these anticipatory and atemporal objects (and surfaces), need new semiotic approaches. Stefania Caliandro has surveyed changes in the ways that semiotic understanding emerges, including the importance of physical morphology of forms versus the dominance of cognitive processes of recognition (Caliandro 2019, 1-2). Caliandro cites morphogenetic theory within sociology, which theorises the emergence of structure and agency within society through cycles of agency within nature and culture (Archer 2000, 121). In thinking through Caliandro's revision of semiotics within artworks, the objectile and subjectile can be used to understand the fields of practice from which more speculative morphologies emerge.

MICHAEL COP AND JANEL ATLAS

**JUDGING A TYPE OF CHARACTER:
THE ANOINTING WOMEN, MINDFULNESS,
AND BEGINNER'S MIND**

In experiences of all kinds, people tend to interpret current inputs through the framework of past events, scanning for patterns and categories in both exceptional and mundane situations. For example, imagine that you are driving a car. Another driver pulls out and cuts you off when you have the right of way. The occurrence is essentially no more than a large object passing very near to you, but what happens next for you as you experience that event? Most drivers would react on instinct to avoid an accident (experience tells us that getting hit by any large and fast-moving object is bad), but some might also flare up with anger at how bad the other driver is. Have you ever jumped to a judgement that a driver is an inconsiderate person or perhaps even reacted aggressively, like laying on the horn or tailgating the other car? Or, do you usually stay present with the specific experience that you are currently having, an event that might involve different factors from similar types of near misses? A quick judgement of the event-as-iterative can inform one's external reaction, a reaction which is informed by how someone classifies events.¹ Many quick judgements about others and their actions—when unquestioned and unconsidered—may over time result in hardening judgements that reduce empathy, block compassion, limit perspective and decrease psychological flexibility.²

This article will argue for mindful awareness and curiosity as correctives to the mindless judgements that sometimes arise from interpreting events that are similar as though they are identical. To make a case for mindfulness as an antidote to judgement, the essay will examine four literary texts that all describe a similar event, an event that triggers judgements within the characters involved in the story world. It will then step back from what's happening in that literary world and trace the differences in details and actions across those four texts, highlighting how readers have over centuries recognised—and yet still often conflated—those differences. The essay will continue to pan out to look at the resulting judgements that have arisen in the process: how real-world readers have tended to fall into the same pattern of judgement that the literary text cautions against. From that textual example and the historic reception of these texts, the essay will then show how an understanding and practice of mindful attention can help prevent similar unquestioned judgements.

SLOWING DOWN

We begin with a literary event for three reasons. The first is purely pragmatic: to place all readers of this paper on equal experiential footing. Unlike the hypothetical example of the car with which we began, any reader of this article can observe an identical literary event (the event has already been written about, and readers can access those writings). The second also has a similar element of egalitarian pragmatism. By virtue of learning to read, many of us will have already experienced the many possible payoffs that close reading offers, such as discovering new stories, understanding ideas in new ways or savouring novelty in language. That is, readers may already be familiar with the benefits of mindfully attending to an activity, and therefore in this essay we remind readers that we are asking them to practice a behaviour that they've likely already done rather than one that they need to learn from scratch. The third reason is the possible belief structures or reactions that might be attached to reading *this* particular text—the Bible. Slow and careful readers of any piece of literature can easily recognise when events repeat in a text, and repetitions in the Bible have drawn voluminous attention precisely because the text had been perceived as salvifically indispensable in much of Western culture for centuries. So many readers attended carefully to the differing accounts of creation in Genesis or to any of the stories in the four Gospels, instances of texts in the Bible that tell of remarkably similar-but-different events.

The Gospel accounts of the anointing of Jesus provide a strong example of repetitions of a seemingly similar event and of how reception of those repetitions has led to judgements about a specific character within those accounts. A woman anoints Jesus once during his lifetime in each of the four canonical Gospels, and the way that those stories have been read over time illustrates the all-too-human tendency to categorise and conflate similar-but-different events.³ That anointing does not appear in the same relative point of Jesus' life in each Gospel, perhaps making the relationship among the anointings seem less than certain for anyone reading those stories for the first time. Nevertheless, the base details are remarkably similar. A woman anoints Jesus early in his ministry in Luke 7:36-50, then either six days (John 12:1-8) or two days (Matt 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9) before the final Passover before his death. Each Gospel has Jesus and the woman in a social situation (not just he and she alone). The woman performs a similar act without speaking; she doesn't state her motivation for doing what she does. Other men at the occasion criticise the woman's actions, but Jesus, in turn, rebuffs their criticisms in defence of the woman. This event offers at least three levels of judgement: the initial (and apparently wrong) judgement handed down by the men observing in the story; Jesus' correction of those men's judgement; and then centuries of readers' judgements about how those stories might inter-relate.

If readers see these stories as all the same, they may privilege induction, by which a pattern emerges, and that pattern might encourage the readers to theorise how or why similar events are likely to occur in the story of this protagonist: a woman means well, and men misjudge those intentions, but both such actions are really a vehicle for showing how the protagonist (whom readers may or may not believe transcends that story world as a god incarnate) sees more clearly, interprets more generously or accepts more willingly. Such might be an apologist reading (as discussed below). However, if readers examine each of these four stories more carefully in parallel and set aside any beliefs, the differences and nuances among the events become apparent (see Table 1),

and readers might see how events-as-iterative can influence subsequent judgements.

Matthew's and Mark's stories are the most similar, and John's falls somewhere in between theirs and Luke's. In Matthew and Mark, an anonymous woman (Matt 26:7; Mark 14:3) anoints Jesus' head (Matt 26:7; Mark 14:3) with "very precious" ointment (Matt 26:7; Mark 14:3) two days before the Passover (Matt 26:2; Mark 14:1) at the house of Simon the Leper in Bethany (Matt 26:6; Mark 14:3). A collective character (the "disciples" in Matt 26:8; "some" in Mark 14:4) rebukes the woman for her wasteful extravagance (Matt 26:8-9; Mark 14:4-5) with money that could be given to the poor. Jesus in turn criticises the disciples' judgement, commends the woman's actions and prophetically asserts that she has anointed him for his burial (Matt 26:11-12; Mark 14:6-8), noting that she will be known in perpetuity for her actions (Matt 26:13; Mark 14:9). In John, the anointer has a name, Mary (John 12:3), the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 11:1). Six days before the Passover (John 12:1), Mary anoints Jesus' feet (John 12:3) with "very costly" ointment (John 12:5) and wipes them with her hair (John 12:3). One specific disciple, Judas Iscariot, criticises Mary for her extravagant action (John 12:4-5), but the text explains that he criticises her not because "he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein" (John 12:6). Jesus in turn rebukes Judas and, as in Matthew and Mark, prophetically reports that Mary has anointed him for his burial (John 12:7-8). In Luke, a woman, identified as "a woman in the city, which was a sinner" (Luke 7:37), comes into Simon (Luke 7:40) the Pharisee's house (Luke 7:36-37) and weeps on and kisses Jesus' feet, dries them with her hair and anoints them with ointment (Luke 7:37). The Pharisee objects "within himself" to the woman's actions, not because they were wasteful but because she is a sinner and because a prophet should know as much (Luke 7:39). Jesus rebukes the Pharisee by way of the parable of the two debtors (Luke 7:40-43) and by contrasting the Pharisee's hospitality with the woman's actions (Luke 7:44-46). The parable implies that the woman's actions are part of a forgiveness/repentance act as opposed to a preparation for Jesus' burial (as they are in Matthew, Mark and John). The episode culminates with Jesus forgiving the woman's sins and lauding her faith (Luke 7:48-50).⁴

Looking at the judgements made against the anointers by the characters in the story world, readers can see notable differences emblematic of the characters and what they most value. In Matthew and Mark, the objections are to waste: the money could be better used for the poor. The Gospel of John censures differently. Certainly, it raises the issue of waste, but only to immediately castigate the objector, Judas, who doesn't really care about the poor, but about the money. That is, the judgement in John is far less about the woman herself. In Luke, the judgement also isn't about waste, but about the moral quality of the anointer and the anointed: she's a sinner, and a prophet should know better than to allow himself to be touched by such a sinner. So, while the anointings appear similar on their face value, the judgements made about them are quite different: waste, dishonesty, sin and lack of insight. If one conflates those accounts, the woman would always be the initial target of the censure, and the reasons for censure become compounded: she's wasteful *and* a sinner. More importantly, taken separately, two accounts (John's and Luke's) make explicit that the judgement isn't even really that much about the woman: the criticism being levelled is about the judger himself and what he believes or wants, rather than about what is actually happening.

Detail	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
When	Two days before Jesus' final Passover	Two days before Jesus' final Passover	(the second year of Jesus' ministry?)	Six days before the Jesus' final Passover
Location	Bethany at the house of Simon the Leper	Bethany at the house of Simon the Leper	House of Simon the Pharisee	Bethany (house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus?)
Anointer	"a woman"	"a woman"	"a woman in the city, which was a sinner"	Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus
Container for ointment	Alabaster box	Alabaster box	Alabaster box	Pound of ointment—no container defined
Anoints with	Ointment	Ointment, Spikenard	Ointment, tears, kisses	Ointment, Spikenard
Ointment description	"very precious"	"very precious"		"very costly"
Ointment price	"sold for much"	"more than three hundred pence"		"three hundred pence"
Body part anointed	Head	Head	Feet	Feet
Who contests the anointing	"his disciples"	"there were some"	Simon the Pharisee	"one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray him"
Reason for objecting	Wasteful; money could be given to poor	Wasteful; money could be given to poor	A 'prophet' should know that the woman is a sinner	Pretext of giving to poor, but objector is "a thief" who holds the bag
Reason for anointing	"she did it for my burial"	"she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying"		"against the day of my burying hath she kept this"
Result for anointer	Known into perpetuity	Known into perpetuity	"Her sins, which are many, are forgiven"	

Table 1: The Differences among the Anointings in the Gospels

HOW A WELL-INTENTIONED WOMAN GETS LABELLED AS A WHORE

These four anointing stories have reception histories that make for a surprisingly appropriate meta-parable. That is, in each version of an anointing event, Jesus cautions participants about checking their preconceived assumptions about a person or an action. Yet, in the time between the recording of those stories and today, interpreters have repeatedly repurposed the texts with similar unexamined judgemental processes to those that Jesus cautions against. For example, in the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great gave a sermon in which he conflated the sinner of Luke's account with the Mary of John's and with Mary Magdalene, essentially fabricating an anointer who would become part of an enduring composite type of the penitent whore,⁵ a designation for Mary Magdalene which itself is a composite. While Mary Magdalene is one of the relatively few women mentioned by name in the canonical Gospels, her name is never explicitly (or implicitly) associated with prostitution. Way has simply led on to way here so that the judgement of the anointed woman is conflation upon conflation.

Of course, such a possible composite does not mean that the anointers were always conflated in subsequent retellings and commentaries, but there were common combinations. Mark's and Matthew's relatively similar stories were usually associated, but they weren't necessarily folded into a Johannine and Lucan composite woman. For example, after the advent of the printing press made texts more widely available, various conflations of the anointings appeared in the poems, sermons and commentaries of early modern England, with Jesus anointed three times, twice or once.⁶ In *The Storie of Stories* (1632), for example, Johan Hiud integrates the events of Jesus' life from across the four Gospels and has three anointings, with the Lucan anointing early in Jesus' ministry, the Johannine anointing six days before the Passover and the Matthean/Marcan two days before the Passover. More commonly though, commentators and authors present two anointings—a Lucan anointing and a Matthean/Marcan/Johannine anointing, with the differences of those latter three reconciled to make the stories fit together. Hill's *The Consent of the Foure Evangelists* (1596) provides such an example:

Then Jesus six days before the Passover coming to Bethania, supped in the house of Simon the leper, but Mary took a box of costly ointment of Spikenard, and broke it, and poured it upon his head, anointed his feet, and wiped his feet with her hair: at which cost, when as some of the disciples, especially Judas the traitor, disdained, Christ allowing of her fact, and promising it should be registered, tells, that she did it against the day of his burying.⁷ (46-47)

Differing-but-easily-reconcilable details are conflated in sequence; for example, both Jesus' head and feet are anointed. More nuanced details are used to clarify less nuanced details to make a more 'complete' story: the nameless woman becomes Mary; the ointment is specifically Spikenard; and Judas is recognised as the disciple who disputes the anointing. Certain details are tacitly suppressed: six days is favoured over two days; the ointment is "costly" rather than "precious"; the company eats at Simon the Leper's house; and while Judas is noted as the main objector, the specific cause of his "disdain" (greed) goes unrecognised.

In such reception—as often in our own daily judgements—belief gave rise to conflation. In the two examples above, the Christian writers in a Christian nation believed the Bible to be divinely inspired, and they also believed that the Bible could not contradict itself: the stories must somehow be consonant, and commentators, exegetes, apologists and poets set out to show that consonance. They start with a conclusion and find ways to smooth the stories from the four Gospels into one. Yet, centuries later, such conflation continues in today's media.⁸ A notable modern example is Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Everything's Alright" in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (a musical with one of the longest runs in the West End), where Mary Magdalene, a prostitute, sings her anointing of Jesus through a composite of the four Gospels (Gospel sources for the details in brackets):

Mary Magdalene:

Sleep and I shall soothe you, calm you and anoint you
Myrrh for your hot forehead [Matthew and Mark] and
Then you'll feel
Everything's alright, yes, everything's fine
And it's cool and the ointment's [all four] sweet
For the fire in your head [Matthew and Mark] and feet [Luke and John]

Judas [John]:

Woman, your fine ointment, brand new and expensive [Matthew, Mark, and John]
Could have been saved for the poor [Matthew, Mark, and John]
Why has it been wasted? We could have raised maybe
Three hundred silver pieces [Mark and John] or more
People who are hungry, people who are starving
Matter more than your feet [Luke and John] and hair [Matthew and Mark]

The four different anointings come together in a catchy ditty, where the anonymous woman of Matthew and Mark joins with the Mary of John and the Lukan woman who is a-sinner-now-Mary-Magdalene. The anonymous, well-intentioned character becomes very recognisable—which, one might suppose, is the opposite effect of having an anonymous character in the first place.

SO WHAT?

Why does this collective conflation matter? Well, in this instance, the initial retellings aren't so much the problem, but their subsequent receptions now attribute a potentially unfavourable identity marker (prostitute) to a character based on elision and loose association. An anonymous woman trying to do something kind is cast as a repentant whore, thereby reinforcing mores about sexuality and worthiness. Sure, one might respond, but these are literary characters, and the four stories have more in common than they don't. But think back to the hypothetical (yet more real to us) event with which this article started: getting cut off by a driver in another car. A mindlessly reactive stance may turn the driver of the other car into a caricature. The offending driver becomes a type of all such drivers (regardless of their particular circumstances at the time), and the 'type' of the bad or inconsiderate driver may fuel a certain kind of response: rapid and judgemental, with oneself as the wronged protagonist at the centre of the event.

When we judge something, we form an opinion or conclusion: right or wrong, tasteful or tasteless, ethical or unethical, appropriate or inappropriate, and those judgements are informed by our values, morals and ethics. The danger arises when the judgements become automatic; we become like the judges in the anointing stories or like the writers who (perhaps unwittingly) perpetuated an unhelpful stereotype through a secondary character in the interest of telling a ‘fuller’ account of their preferred protagonist. However, when we train ourselves to stay with the uniqueness of each experience we have, we employ a metacognitive approach that can enable us to cut through the prevailing judgemental and preconceived conclusions upon which we frequently (and thoughtlessly) rely. Indeed, one of the earliest and most prolific scholars of mindfulness and psychology in the west, Ellen Langer, posits that mindfulness is “a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context. Being mindful leads us to greater sensitivity to context and perspective, and ultimately to greater control over our lives.”⁹ Unquestioned judgements issue from a mindset that neglects context and possibility. Therefore, ‘reading’ a situation with an attitude of open attention enables us to engage more fully with reality instead of lapsing into our assumptions. This approach is called mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a state of mind in which one focuses on experience in the present moment in a non-judgemental way.¹⁰ For our purposes, in considering an alternative to hardening judgements, we are particularly interested in the central tenet of ‘non-judging.’ When people pay attention to the present moment non-judgementally, their minds take on a quality of cognitive flexibility with which they can “categorise familiar stimuli in novel ways” and think in “engaged and open rather than in automatic and unexamined ways.”¹¹ As mindfulness has grown in popularity and application, scholars have studied the ways that mindfulness might play a role in myriad cognitive and behavioural situations, including how it can help to solve problems in fields as diverse as psychotherapy,¹² education,¹³ medicine¹⁴ and, most usefully for our purposes, making decisions and forming judgements.¹⁵

Though any of us can tend to jump to conclusions—like the men described in the anointing stories—we can cultivate greater awareness of *our awareness* to counteract the habitual reactions we have. Practitioners and researchers of mindfulness argue that a mindful approach is most effective as a practice (something one *does*) that develops a quality of mind (something one *is*). In other words, mindfulness is not a static, consistent trait; the action of carefully attending improves focus over time,¹⁶ which offers benefits for unlearning rote assumptions and snap judgements.

Those who seek to become more mindful take an open approach to what is happening around them through their five senses, and within them, through their thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations; those who wish to be more mindful selectively pay attention to that which is here and now. Taking a mindful approach requires people to discern what most deserves focus, which they then do by directing their attention to the present moment with a non-judgemental and observant stance, fostering acceptance and noticing but not giving into the allure of preconceived notions.¹⁷ Indeed, a central tenet of Buddhist philosophy holds that “the judgemental mind arises from a lack of mindfulness.”¹⁸ In his essay exploring judgement in the context of Buddhist models of mind, Manfred Seegers describes where a lack of mindfulness might lead when someone criticises us:

Instead of just staying with the facts and understanding the words as an opportunity to learn or even improve, we might take them personally, judge them as an insult to us, and react with a negative emotion towards the person ... since the judgemental mind always follows the strongest habitual pattern, the solution would be to become more mindful of this process of cause and effect and use the space available to change habits.¹⁹

Learning, growing, correcting errors, and evolving require that one possesses some degree of mindfulness because without a reflexive and flexible ability to notice and stay open to what is happening, one's perspective hardens and calcifies, letting nothing new in.

If one wants to counteract the human tendency to react on instinct (mindlessly judge), what approaches are open for developing that metacognitive skill? *Shoshin* or 'beginner's mind' is a quality of mindfulness that supports this practice of remaining open to the new, uncertain and not-yet-categorised.²⁰ Beginner's mind entails looking at a thing as though seeing it for the first time: with curiosity, wonder and openness. Taking up a habit of beginner's mind requires that one, as much as possible, drop pre-conceptions and take the situation as an opportunity to remain interested and inquisitive. Langer's concept of mindfulness is brought into experience by simply asking, what can I notice that's new here? Mindfulness is essentially the process of drawing novel distinctions,²¹ an activity that takes the mind out of the default node network and engages the individual in the present. Rather than relying on distinctions and categories drawn from the past. A person seeking out new distinctions can develop "(1) a greater sensitivity to one's environment, (2) more openness to new information, (3) the creation of new categories for structuring perception, and (4) enhanced awareness of multiple perspectives in problem solving."²²

Think back to the hypothetical near-miss due to another driver cutting you off. You might first notice the emotional charge of fear and anger coming up within your body (if indeed you have any reaction). Where do those emotions manifest physiologically: tight, fast breaths; sped-up heart rate; tunnel vision; tight shoulders? Then, you could start to regulate your emotions (staying with the actual sensations and your response, rather than diving into judgement and narrative rumination) by slowing and deepening the breath, which almost immediately activates the parasympathetic nervous system state. Rather than telling yourself stories about the other driver and why they did what they did, you can stay with your bodily sensations, name the feelings you're experiencing and allow them to pass. When you effectively regulate an emotional reaction to an upsetting situation, you can observe and more thoughtfully respond, rather than retaliate or get caught up in what you *think* the event means. Langer's research suggests that simply posing the question, 'what can I notice that's new here?' can engage your beginner's mind and prevent the typical slide into dysregulation and judgement. Is it raining? Is there sun glare? Is the vehicle that cut you off a family vehicle? Get curious; give the brain an assignment that keeps interpretations open rather than shut down.

To consider the ways in which beginner's mind may (or may not!) work in deeper analysis and when performing a close reading, let's consider a less hypothetical situation: your potential reaction to our use of the Gospel anointing stories as examples for exploring mindfulness. We chose this example precisely because we thought that it may induce two very different reactions. Secular readers might have felt an aversion to those stories,

perhaps thinking that the authors of this essay would take a religious or dogmatic tone. Christian readers may have already begun to analyse the examples with implications for their faith in mind. But a reader—secular, religious or otherwise—operating from a position of beginner’s mind would not begin with the assumption that the stories are meant to be devotional, exculpatory or eschatological, or that the stories can be easily harmonised for narrative neatness. Instead, they would be open and curious about what those stories might signify here in a special edition about judgement.

Mindfulness in reading, then, models mindfulness in life. When we step away from automatic responses—whether in how we read a text placed before us or how we interpret the driver who cuts us off—we allow for nuance. We resist the pull toward flattening others into caricatures, and we stay longer with what we might not yet understand. To mistake one anointing woman for another, to see one instance of anointing as identical to another, or to see a car cutting us off as just another instance of inconsiderate drivers is to fall into a trap of mental efficiency at the cost of insight. That trap is analogous to the ways we collapse people and experiences in our own lives into predictable patterns. Practicing mindfulness can help all of us slow down enough to ask: What am I really seeing here? What might I be missing? What assumptions am I bringing into this moment?

In answering those questions, all of us can explore our own assumptions and values. In a study of the effects of mindfulness on ethical decision making, Nicole Ruedy and Maurice Schweitzer found that judgements that are “self-serving” are frequently “effortless and almost immediate, in contrast to the effortful and time-consuming perspective-taking required to develop an unbiased opinion.”²³ In other words, when we jump to an easy judgement about a situation, like the fictional men observing the woman anointing Jesus, we take the quickest and easiest route to certainty and confirmation of the biases we already hold. By bringing an attitude of mindfulness to our thought process in how we read texts and events, we can better see and interrogate our beliefs—without the help of an external Messianic protagonist.

Clearly, we must sometimes make discerning choices; the act of judging is not intrinsically something to avoid. Yet when we take a slower, more attentive and more mindful approach to the matter at hand, we often reach improved outcomes and more flexible interpretations. In an essay about the relationship between mindfulness and justice, law theorist Clark Freshman describes the qualities of mindfulness that strengthen the work of lawyers and judges, which include counteracting implicit biases, interpreting clues and information more flexibly and modulating emotional responses to stimuli.²⁴ The combination of those qualities can help us all, not just members of the justice system, to focus on collecting information with curiosity and not jumping to reactive and emotion-driven conclusions.

It is in the space between our habitual reaction and our assessment or next action that we can intervene with an attitude of mindful awareness. Within that space, we can learn how to better avoid the rote judgements we tend to fall into again and again, like the men who disapproved in the gospels, only to become enduring exemplars of limited perspectives. The very act of slowing down and bringing the mind into a more curious and open state is what enables us to make a different choice than we might usually make. When we adopt a mindful attitude, we create a wedge between something

that is happening and the way that we make sense of and categorise it. Doing so provides the situation and the people within it a bit of space to breathe, allows us to regulate any emotional reaction we are having and offers the opportunity to choose curiosity, openness, interest and friendliness. While in this essay we have taken up passages for close reading and a hypothetical incident of frustration on the motorway, we hope it is apparent that both the harm of unquestioned judgement and the offers of inhabiting beginner's mind have widespread and significant implications for the complex problems we face. These span from within our own psyches to interpersonal relationships with family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, out to organisational and governmental networks, the nation and the globe. The work of cultivating beginner's mind, of simply noticing what's new and different in this very present moment instead of thoughtlessly issuing a reactive judgement about a person or a situation, occurs within the only arena in which we have both agency and power to make a change. The changes we create within our inner habits and perspectives can materially improve our capacity and creativity in comprehension, problem solving, diplomacy and compassion, which then can inform how we behave and move in the world.

When we cultivate a beginner's mind, open awareness of our own inner lives and a curiosity about what is really happening, instead of what we assume is happening, we do not necessarily free ourselves from the judgements we must make on a regular basis. Yet, we become better equipped to discover if, for example, all women offering an act of kindness must be repentant in some way, if all drivers who cut us off are really the same or if we—as the constant in each situation—can manage more effectively how and why we react.

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CULTURED READINGS: TRANSCOLONIALITY AND AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT IN GLOBAL LITERARY CRITICISM

INTRODUCTION

My reflection revolves around the aporiae of critical appreciation in World Literature, suspended between an educated, erudite—or *cultured*—set of criteria and the expectation of extracultural validity of literature. I play, deliberately and ironically, with the double resonance of the adjective 'cultured', evoking concomitantly the profundity of cultivation and the limiting inscription in the boundaries of a culture (in the singular). Evoking the evolution of literary criticism as it constantly strives to enlarge its horizons and overcome limitations, be they of classical Comparative Literature, the postcolonial school, or new approaches to World Literature, I will argue in favour of radical aesthetic pluralism, and thus postulate readings that transcend the limitations of the *cultured* perspectives.

Contrary to various attempts at formulating the premises of universal aesthetic judgement—contrary even to postcolonial critical frameworks—such radical pluralism, respecting the spheres of obscurity and untranslatability, creates sufficient space for the recognition of idiosyncratic values of texts, including, as I will later exemplify, those of West African Pulaar literature. Tracing a possible continuation of the historical line of criticism, which has constantly striven to transform and adapt its theoretical premises to include greater and greater variety of literary creation, I will argue in favour of transindigenous and transcolonial approaches as means of drawing, in the minutest details, the global map of literatures.

THE EXPANDING HORIZONS

On the one hand, critical appreciation is rooted in an informed, educated, *cultured* horizon from which the aesthetic criteria for any valid, intersubjective judgement must come. On the other, there exists a persistent expectation that literary work will remain valid and valued beyond its 'locatedness,' the cultural, linguistic and geographic area where it originated. Even if the concept of universalism, as a reminder of Western pretension of symbolic hegemony, has been deconstructed and rejected, there appears, repeatedly and at various points of the globe, the expectation that literature will open

cultural horizons, contributing to some cross-cultural affinity.¹ This expectation remains valid, although the European—thus naturally Eurocentric—project of Comparative Literature, formulated by Goethe at the end of the eighteenth century, gave way at the beginning of the twenty-first century to the new conceptualisation of World Literature and the global understanding of literary studies. The *annus mirabilis* 2003 brought about two almost parallel developments: Spivak’s daring statement of the “death” of Comparative Literature (understood as the downfall of the Eurocentric discipline)² and David Damrosch’s globalising question: “What is World Literature?”³

I start my reflection over twenty years after Spivak’s and Damrosch’s seminal publications, and with even greater chronological distance to other works and ideas that have shaped Western literary studies. The exhaustion of paradigms grounded in resistance to symbolic dominance, such as postcolonial theory, is a natural development as cultures that once suffered colonial oppression embark on new paths of autonomous evolution and gradually disengage from colonial legacies. It is also important to notice that the idea of global validity of literature is no longer based on the criterion of taste connected to the pleasurable experience of reading as defined by Roland Barthes.⁴ Rather, it is rooted in the ethical dimension exploited in the Schillerian concept of “aesthetic education,” redesigned by Gayatri Spivak.⁵ In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes distinguishes between two types of readerly experiences—*plaisir* (pleasure) and *jouissance* (bliss)—using them to critique traditional literary consumption. *Plaisir* refers to the comfortable enjoyment that a reader experiences when engaging with a text that aligns with their expectations, cultural codes and values. These texts are typically *lisible* (‘readerly’)—coherent, familiar and easy to consume. They reinforce identity, social norms and established ideologies. They satisfy but do not challenge. In contrast, *jouissance* (a complex French term that can mean bliss, orgasmic intensity or transgressive pleasure) involves a more intense, unsettling and transformative experience. It occurs with *scriptible* (‘writerly’) texts that are fragmented, experimental and challenge the cultural status quo.

Spivak, on the other hand, although drawing from the ethical premises of the postcolonial school, steers away from its classical formulations toward a broader understanding of the global age in which otherness and cultural distance are more important than hegemony and subalternity (a crucial concept Spivak herself contributed to postcolonial discourse). In the first decades of the new millennium, she reconsiders the purpose of reading literature in terms of ethical training rather than mere pleasurable experience. Her notion of ‘aesthetic education’ is a critical reworking of the concept originally associated with Romantic thinkers like Friedrich Schiller, who saw aesthetic education as a way to harmonise reason and emotion, and thus cultivate moral and political sensibility. Spivak transforms this tradition to suit not only her postcolonial, deconstructive and feminist commitments, but also the requirements of a global mindset. For her, aesthetic education is not about cultivating taste or appreciation of beauty, but about training the imagination in ways that foster ethical responsibility and action, despite large distances and cultural differences. It helps individuals imagine the world from others’ perspectives—particularly those of the disenfranchised and subaltern, but also culturally alien.

Gayatri Spivak argues that contemporary education systems—especially in neoliberal and globalised contexts—prioritise utilitarianism, technical skills and market-driven

outcomes. Aesthetic education, in her view, works against this by nurturing slow, careful, non-instrumental thinking. In her work—especially in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalisation* (2012)—Spivak uses aesthetic education as a framework for thinking about how to make ethical and political engagement across cultural boundaries possible, without unduly appropriating or speaking for the cultures not one's own. Aesthetic education creates the space for the other to be heard, if not understood, and is a necessary preparation for learning from the other, which includes unlearning privilege and habits of domination. It is aligned with deconstruction, where the goal is not the mastery of content but openness to difference, otherness and ethical discomfort. Literature enables the kind of *teleopoiesis* (making-a-distant-other-present) that is central to her ethical project. Overall, Spivak's aesthetic education is designed not merely as a basis of critical judgement but as a transformative process that trains the ethical imagination through engagement with literature and the humanities, fostering responsibility to the other in a world dominated by instrumental reason and neoliberal globalisation.

In a broad chronological perspective of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the evolution of ways of understanding the importance of literature, marked by the influential conceptualisations of Barthes and Spivak, accompanies the multifaceted process of cross-cultural broadening of horizons and expectations related to literature. Individual modes of reading are less and less *cultured*, or informed and predetermined by received legacies, ethnicity, class and geographic location. At the same time, they acquire an ethical dimension that decentres purely aesthetic questions. With *teleopoesis*, cultural distance shortens. Cultures become mutually more visible and accessible, without becoming entirely transparent to each other. Ties of cultural identification loosen, making the reading subject migrate through various aesthetic locations and sets of coordinates. This process has profound implications in matters of judgement.

HOW IS CROSS-CULTURAL CRITICAL JUDGEMENT POSSIBLE?

In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), one of the most influential works of literary theory in the twentieth century, Northrop Frye attempted to create a systematic, coherent framework for literary criticism, drawing on four key aspects of literature: modes, symbols, myths and genres. His goal was to move beyond impressionistic or ideological criticism toward a structure rooted in literature itself. Hypothetically, such a structure could be universal. The approach was designed to free criticism from being historically—and, in a way, also culturally—contingent. The modal classification of literary texts based on the power of the hero (superior or inferior to the power of other men, gods or environmental factors) or the theory of symbols based on five levels of meaning (from literal to anagogic) seem abstract enough to encompass a great variety of literary texts. This is why it provides a tempting framework, or at least a starting point, for the critical appreciation of global literature(s). Certainly, pre-structuralist and structuralist approaches more generally were rooted in Western literary patrimony. Yet Frye (like Auerbach⁶ and other giants of twentieth-century literary criticism) contemplated a broad chronology from Graeco-Roman Antiquity to twentieth-century realism. In his attempt to encompass a variety of potential texts in a hypothetical 'grammar' of the mythical, he was opening a gate to even more varied forms of literature. Through the new discipline of ethnology, which

in Frye's time introduced materials from outside the Western world, it was hoped that non-European mythical narratives would intersect with the archaic beginnings of Mediterranean literatures.

Undoubtedly, Frye's aim was to maximise the divergence of aesthetic choices that could be approached through his definition of criticism. Yet in the decades that followed, the adaptability and limitations of his abstract model (and similar systems created by other scholars) were repeatedly put to the test. One recent circumstance appears as a particular challenge: the chronological, geographical and cultural diversity of forms of literature entering scrutiny within transnational academia has grown exponentially. Any "anatomy of criticism" today must be inscribed in an ever-broadening horizon.

The process of testing theories across cultural contexts has not proved twentieth-century literary theory wrong; it has merely made patent the necessity of adding new chapters to the approaches that departed from what was essentially a single line of tradition. Twentieth-century critics strived to capture the Mediterranean beginnings of the European evolution and follow it along a continuous, undisturbed timeline. The current challenge of global literary theory is incomparably more complex. Instead of a clear, unified line of tradition, it looks like a network or a bundle of timelines, contaminating, criss-crossing, patchy, disappearing and reappearing over geographic expanse and incommensurable chronologies. Contemporary literary theory, to become truly global, must deal with a far greater number of factors; it must contemplate multiple literary histories and describe their mutual connectivities. Obviously, such a discipline is still in the making. Its ambitious aims stand far apart from existing approaches that often merely collect those predominantly Western-centric methodological insights that might eventually 'go global' and re-employ them for World Literature criticism.⁷

Contrasting boldly with Eurocentric Comparative Literature, World Literature studies, as they were designed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, were supposed to be a confluence of different cultural traditions and lines of aesthetic development rather than an emanation of the Western tradition in literary criticism. However, the heterogeneous forms, contents and points of view that make World Literature 'worldly' constitute a vast, unexplored field. Perceptions of 'worldliness' range from appetite to frustration. David Damrosch has speculated on a global literature (as distinct from World Literature) "that might be read solely in airline terminals, unaffected by any specific context whatever." Not only would this literature be deprived of any defining locatedness, but it would be read "in ways profoundly shaped by home-country norms."⁸ Such a global literature and definition of reading experience would thus be situated on the antipodes of radical aesthetic pluralism that I search to define and defend in this article. It would also be distant from the ethical dimension of *teleopoiesis* as the representation of and advocacy for distant otherness.

In many ways, the concept of World Literature emerges—through the intellectual mediation of Gayatri Spivak—from the deconstruction and the ethical legacy of Jacques Derrida and his concept of hospitality. The very notion of *a* (rather than *the*) world implied in the name of the discipline is associated with the advent of otherness, which should be admitted and welcomed in the spirit of Derridean hospitality. It is the coming of the radically other that "opens a world" and leads, to use the phrasing of Pheng Cheah, to "a conception of the world as the text ... a nontotalizable whole constituted

by a movement of overflowing.”⁹ Adopting the welcoming attitude grounded in the perception of dynamic diversity and ‘overflowing’ abundance, Cheah is sceptical about a static notion of ‘the world.’ Derived from or shaped by the historical experience of expansion, colonialism and the globalised economy, such a notion implies unhindered traversability of geographical space. This post-expansionist vision of ‘the world’ privileges or presupposes the facility for penetration, translatability, transparency and knowability of cultural presuppositions. On the other hand, a recent popular usage of the term ‘worlding’ rather than ‘world’ reflects the priority given to fluxes and dynamic processes of becoming over static realities and cultural status quo. The uncontrollable ‘overflowing,’ or the ‘worlding’ of World Literature—its dynamic aspect differentiating it from the old, Goethean vision of *Weltliteratur* as ‘the great conversation’ involving Greek and Roman classics—is conditioned by the emergence of radical aesthetic pluralism.

As we pass from the geographic to the aesthetic plane, it becomes apparent that the ‘smoothness,’ ‘traversability’ or penetrability of literary territories have never been evident. Each literary tradition is characterised by a varying degree of opaqueness, rather than transparency. It builds up its own set of codified genres and imageries, ideological starting points, criteria and definitions of literary mastery. Does it mean that critical judgement in World Literature is impossible, or possible only as an intuitive appreciation of what resonates with an individual criticising subject, working privately beyond the frontiers of their *cultured* erudition and competence? Does the aesthetics of ‘overflow’ in World Literature impose fluidity of criteria? If informed, professional judgements reinforce cultural hegemonies, should not they rather be deconstructed than practised? Or rather, does the task of deconstructing hegemonies necessarily imply a suspension of judgement? These questions put to the test the flexibility of new theoretic approaches created to describe the full scale of complexity implied in a truly globalised perception of literary studies.

TRANSPARENCY AND CIRCULATION VS “UNTRANSLATABLE CROSSINGS”

Just as we saw in relation to the crucial term ‘(the/a) world,’ in global academic literary studies there coexist two functional, partially overlapping understandings of the concept ‘World Literature.’ One apprehends World Literature as a unified, globalised circulation of texts that are untranslatable and, as a consequence, barely say those things which may be expressed in the dominant languages and aesthetic codes. The spheres of culture-specific obscurity—related to untranslatable concepts, idiosyncratic aesthetic criteria or simply exotic literary genres—remain outside the scope of the globalised concept of literariness and literary communication based on translatability and circulation of translated texts. Such a sphere of ‘marketable’ (and thus digestible), readable, shared texts produces a space of clarity, understanding and shared values, but also one of silencing. This is why Aamir Mufti admits that World Literature is a fallacious construct, derived from the old, imperial image of the world “as a continuous and traversable space.”¹⁰ A second, fuller, truer apprehension of World Literature must admit zones of opacity, complexity, idiomatic concepts and values unshared.

The very phenomenon of global circulation—if this is regarded as the phenomenon making World Literature possible—is based on a shared model of *cultured* critical

judgement and involves only those texts which fall into the paradigms that such judgement is nimble enough to accommodate. The marketable World Literature, put on sale by leading global editing companies, reflects the status quo derived from Western symbolic hegemony, and so does the most widespread practice of literary criticism in transnational academia. Evidently, in this everyday practice of reading World Literature, shaped essentially by the postcolonial school, the paradigms appear to be plural. Nonetheless, I argue that the literary landscape shaped by postcoloniality has its own insufficiencies and shortcomings, necessitating the transcolonial approach I address below. Postcolonial studies are essentially based on power asymmetries and differentials rather than horizontal relationships of co-existence and co-creation. They assume as their starting point the centrality of colonialism as a key historical phenomenon enabling the transition of non-Western cultures towards modernity and modern literature (destined to replace traditional oralities, performativities or alternative forms of penmanship). Certainly, postcolonial criticism advocated pluralism, yet typical postcolonial literature, striving to deconstruct the dominant languages, discourses and sets of aesthetic criteria, remained in their orbit. This is why the pluralism achieved inside the postcolonial framework is still an order of magnitude lower than the effective aesthetic plurality created by humanity. The postcolonial school opened new windows upon global landscapes, yet many idiosyncratic forms of creativity, thriving in the margins of colonial dynamics, remained invisible.

Also, we are far from encompassing all the variety of forms of literary expression that exist among human cultures, because the popularity and productivity of the postcolonial school contributed to a widespread academic practice that derived from formerly dominant aesthetic values. It privileged (as the object of studies) those forms of expression that are rooted, however remotely, in Western tradition or share common denominators with it. As a consequence, in perspectives that take the postcolonial status quo as their starting point, World Literature remains, to quote Emily Apter, a discipline policing “untranslatable crossings” in which cultural idiolects are reduced to those categories that may be expressed in the dominant languages.¹¹

An even broader, more encompassing and problematic understanding of World Literature is possible, if we agree—and intellectually dare—to include dark, unexplored and untranslatable spheres of radical aesthetic pluralism. Such an endeavour may come at the price of tolerating the unknowability and obscurity of texts, as well as essential incompetence of the scholar or critic. Stepping beyond the tradition of *cultured* readings, they must present any judgement as suspended or provisory, striving to acknowledge and describe—yet not necessarily to include into a coherent totality—the disparity of origins, histories, genres, imageries and culture-specific criteria of aesthetic appreciation. As Daniel Heath Justice of the Cherokee Nation has said: “It’s about the ways we understand that vexed and vexing idea of *literature*, and how assumptions about what is or is not ‘literary’ are used to privilege some voices and ignore others.”¹² The stake of provisory practice of *uncultured* reading, at least initially, is purely negative. Its aim is to deconstruct any concept of ‘the literary’ that would fall short to include manifestations of human creativity, fostering the fallacious understanding of World Literature.

TRANSINDIGENOUS AND TRANSCOLONIAL UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE OF WORLD LITERATURE

World Literature in the latter sense of the term—the inclusive, yet often obscure sphere of radical pluralism, reflecting the complexity, disparity and precariousness of human expression—poses an additional challenge to any project of literary criticism, yet creates fertile ground for transindigenous and transcolonial approaches. Transindigenous studies is already a recognised field that explores relationships, solidarities and intellectual exchanges among Indigenous peoples across geographic, national and cultural boundaries. Over the last decade or so, its methodological consistency has been provided by such scholars as Chadwick Allen.¹³ Transcoloniality, on the other hand, is a recent concept,¹⁴ built on an awareness of the exhaustion of the postcolonial approaches, based on the recognition of power differentials and exploiting the implications of oppressive vertical and hierarchical structures. Rather than leading to successful healing of cultures, ‘postcoloniality’ as a state of mind reaffirmed the opposition between hegemony and subalternity, and led to the further proliferation of mechanisms of oppression in a new cultural status quo that Achille Mbembe defined as “postcolony.”¹⁵ As an emergent philosophical notion (rather than merely a term for a given chronology or point in cultural evolution), transcoloniality moves beyond the confrontational posture of decolonial philosophy.¹⁶ The old premises of resistance, opposition or protest are replaced by a more peaceful, harmonious philosophy. Transcolonial studies and literary criticism strive to make visible the horizontal structures that were omitted by postcolonialism, privileging networks, partnerships, co-creativity and coexistence (exemplified in the African notion of Ubuntu).¹⁷

Here, I would like to reflect further on transcoloniality as a viable concept of literary criticism. Its core consists of the idea of closing the colonial-decolonial-postcolonial cycle in local cultural histories, achieving a stage of healing in which the historical fact of colonisation is no longer treated as the central, determining factor. Transcolonial cultures develop a clear awareness of their deep temporality—a past that lies beyond Westernised notions of history and time. The Western tendency is to build up shallow time perspectives limited by the milestones of colonial chronology, from so-called ‘discovery’ to settlement, further developments, events and consequences that hardly reach beyond the boundaries established by the essentialised coloniality.¹⁸ The development of a concept of deep temporality, on the other hand, consolidates and valorises formerly marginalised legacies. Traditional modalities of expression, genres of oral literature or currents of thought that developed in the shadow of the mainstream colonial history of countries and regions, and that were often silenced or simply absent in the postcolonial literary awakenings, may now appear in the limelight. Transcoloniality may also be a nimble tool for the study of minoritarian ethnic/tribal cultures that stood apart from decolonial movements and postcolonial projects of nation-building, and, further, in critical Indigenous studies, as an intellectual and aesthetic response to colonial realities that have not been satisfactorily resolved through successive phases of ‘decolonisation.’ As a tool of literary criticism, the concept of transcoloniality helps to distinguish and valorise the overlapping layers of expression, often masking or making invisible one another. It privileges the ultraminor voices rooted in deep temporalities that differ, by their specific aesthetic idioms, from the dominant strands of postcolonial literature—often produced in the same countries and regions—that enter without any hindrance the global routes of circulation of translated literature.

TRANSCOLONIALITY AS A CONSOLIDATION OF LEGACIES

Transcoloniality as a process of healing involves a novel approach to the patrimonialisation of literary expression (independently of its character or modes of transmission, such as oral, written or through digital records). A closer look at a West African example may help to understand the stakes and utility of a transcolonial approach in fostering aesthetic abundance and preserving the diversity of human expression against the often cited danger of the “white noise” or “global babble”¹⁹ of World Literature degenerating into a standardised, interchangeable form of literary expression marketed by international editing houses. The global omnipresence and unhindered accessibility of standard postcolonial literature tends to hide minor presences, the idiomatic expression of marginalised cultures. The case of literature in Pulaar is exemplary in this context. Fulani (Fulfulde, Fulbe) is a nomadic, semi-nomadic or sedentary ethnic group inhabiting the Sahara and Sahel from the westernmost tip of the African continent to the gates of Sudan. In totality, this dispersed ethnic group encompasses, according to various estimates, between 25 and 40 million people. Nonetheless, the Fulani are not majoritarian in any territory. This predominantly Islamicate population adopted written expression in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, due to non-colonial factors and processes, such as the expansion of Sufi brotherhoods. Their literary production, in Arabic, or in Pulaar written in Arabic script, was occasionally studied by the colonisers with whom this ethnic group came into contact: the English, French and Portuguese, who encountered the Fulani in their minuscule West African colony, today Guinea-Bissau. Already in 1948, José Mendes Moreira enriched his monograph on the Fulani from the region of Gabu not only with a tentative grammar of Pulaar but also a translation of some fragments of their *tarikā*—historical writings, written on coarse, locally produced “marabou paper.”²⁰ Nonetheless, the early scholars introducing the study of postcolonial literature in Portugal did not imagine any possible continuity between this tradition of penmanship and ‘literature’ as they understood this concept. No wonder that they discoursed on the scarcity of literary expression in Guinea-Bissau,²¹ and, further, accentuated the link between colonial history and the emergence of modern literature.²² Nonetheless, traditional penmanship gave rise to contemporary literature in Pulaar, relying on the Fulani diaspora and transnational networks of cultural activists. Mélanie Bourlet narrates her encounter with this largely invisible yet vivacious literary reality spreading across Senegal, Mauritania, France and beyond. At the same time, she accentuates the community-building aspect of literary creativity and circulation. Books in Pulaar create a transnational network of their own, including “sites of militancy that could be incarnated in a single individual, an association, a suburb, a neighbourhood, a building, or a private publisher.”²³

As Bourlet admits, the emergence and development of new Pulaar writing may be closely associated with circumstances of migration and the literacy courses provided to immigrant workers in Europe. Nonetheless, the rapid succession of such biographical events as learning how to write and the decision to develop one’s own literary creation testifies to the existence and vitality of a cultural background in which penmanship is highly valorised. This legacy, awaiting consolidation, makes possible the emergence of such figures as Baylaa Kulibali, an immigrant worker in France and the author of the autobiographical narration *Nguurndam Tumaranke* (The Life of a Foreigner), published in fragments in 1981 and 1983, and in its complete form in 1991.²⁴ According to Bourlet, “it is marked by a sober writing style that reflects the author’s project to unmask

the difficult life conditions of immigrant workers,” provoking spontaneous emulation as other immigrants shared the desire to write about their own experiences.²⁵

Questions of taste and cultural identity appear as tightly interwoven in this context. For individuals and communities involved in the preservation of this West African legacy, the literature in Pulaar is significant enough to justify considerable investment of their—most probably rather meagre—resources. It is ‘good’ enough to be highly valued, appreciated and carefully preserved. At the same time, virtually none of those books is likely to enter the dominant networks of global circulation. It is ‘not good enough’ to interest the mainstream publishers and marketers of literature. These contradictory judgements have less to do with the degree to which the Fulani authors master their means of expression, and more with the fact that those means remain culturally idiomatic. Contemporary literature in Pulaar, written in the Latin alphabet since the 1960s, includes poetry in free verse (an innovation in relation to traditional genres derived from broader Islamicate tradition), fiction and autobiographical narratives, maintaining a minoritarian capability of challenging the major literary traditions, such as the Arabic, French or even Portuguese.

Pulaar literature remains at the margins of the majoritarian editing industry, relying instead on networks of activism. The motivations of authors and readers may be associated not with factors, such as the ‘beauty’ of the writing or the expectation of financial profit, that move the mainstream book market, but with the high valorisation of penmanship and reading as such, deeply rooted in traditional culture. At the same time, the intertextual relations of the contemporary texts with the legacy of Pulaar epics and the broader world of West African *griots* (Mandinga and Fulani storytellers) make them hard to understand for readers unfamiliar with this tradition. These texts require a literary taste that radically diverges from what might be seen as the standardised expectation of global readers (shaped by such forces as Western-centric postcolonial writing and globalisation of the novel as the main literary genre). A Pulaar text may be rooted in oral tradition and styled as a parody of celebrated West African epics, requiring a reader to recognise the references to appreciate the comedic effect. Through this requirement of a *cultured* reading—yet a reading that is radically decentred, not only in relation to Eurocentric paradigms but also to globalised literary standards, shaped by major literary traditions—Pulaar writing brings about aesthetic pluralism.

The Fulani pastoralists, evicted from their environment by the climate change affecting the Sahel since the 1960s, illustrate the transversal identities that characterise a globalised world. Their peculiar literature, just like their often unwelcome presence as economic migrants, may be considered unpalatable from the hegemonic, Eurocentric perspective. However, the artistry of writers in Pulaar grows out of a significant, coherent, multiseular legacy that lasted and developed at the margins of colonisation. Transcolonial consolidation of this patrimony broadens the horizons of aesthetic pluralism and contributes to aesthetic diversity, against the perception of World Literature as an aesthetically featureless ‘white noise.’

The idiomatic West African legacy of topics and imagery is adapted to contemporary conditions and problems, such as the circumstances of migration. Certainly, migration loosens the ties of the traditional society. Yet literature, be it written or oral (transmitted by modern electronic means), helps to tighten the bonds once again. The niche repertoire of forms and imagery characterising the Fulani expression paradoxically

serves this purpose of rebuilding the community. In doing so, it may proliferate in the modest micro-scale of the nomadic and diasporic communities, at the margins of major roads of circulation of World Literature that imply translation, vast presence on the global book market, recognition through a system of international literary prizes and—last but not least—abundant academic reception and criticism.

Further, micro-scale movements, carried by diasporas or finding transindigenous resonance in distant locations, can go as global as many a sample of mainstream literary production. Critical appreciation of such phenomena is crucial for the construction of aesthetic pluralism. Just as they defy judgement in global literary criticism, they generate the dynamism of ‘worlding’, the constant movement that ‘overflows’ any static definition of literariness and taste, as well as readers’ and critics’ horizons of expectations.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued for the necessity of a redefined, transcolonial notion of aesthetic judgement. Fostering novel criteria of what is valid and worth preserving, transcolonial judgement must correspond to the notion of radical aesthetic pluralism. A transcolonial notion of ‘the literary,’ abdicating post-hegemonic aspirations of universal translatability, clarity and shared criteria, relies instead on transindigenous solidarity to consolidate divergent legacies. Such bodies of texts as Pulaar literature may or may not go global; the aim is not to make them globally available. The desired outcome of the criticism I have tried to sketch in this paper is rather to foster such a vision of global aesthetic pluralism that would not only acknowledge the existence or value of minor and ultraminor forms of expression, but understand World Literature as a tapestry woven with such fine threads. It is not any particular example of minor literature that is to be appreciated, but the endless variety and proliferation of the forms of literary creativity.

Radical aesthetic pluralism acknowledges the absence of shared coordinates of judgement, accepting and actively protecting the proliferation of varied types of literature at the margins of major global trends, schools of thought, criticism and academic practice. What I have called *cultured* reading—rooted in deep time perspective, informed, yet deliberately culture-specific—may be reconstructed inside the framework of radical pluralism. Such reading may be aligned with the exigence of a radical pluralisation of horizons, faithfully tracing the intricacies of disruptive traditions. Their coexistence beyond symbolic hegemony is rather an ethical postulate than a description of an objective reality. Power differentials, nonetheless, are counterbalanced by the advocacy of equal rights. The academic practice of contemplating obscurity, rather than exploiting translatability and clarity, can play a major role in this ethical programme of granting aesthetic abundance to all human beings. The vision of World Literature that emerges from such a process of criticism and exploration has the potential to achieve an unprecedented level of complexity, far beyond the boldest dreams (or nightmares) of the early makers of the ‘universal canon.’ Those established histories, so persuasively narrated in Damrosch’s *What Is World Literature?*—describing the thrill of the colonial discoverers of the clay tablet libraries in Nineveh or the missionaries learning about the excellence of Aztec poetry and striving to Christianise it—usually spoke of destruction or undue appropriation. The new notion of horizontal solidarity may serve better the cause of preservation and consolidation of divergent legacies.

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1. To give an example, Francesca Orsini has recently analysed the quest for universal values through literature in the Indian cultural context of the early decades of the twentieth century, analysing debates included in such periodicals as Ramanand Chatterjee's *Modern Review*, translations, publishers' series, and anthologies shaping an Indian understanding of what World Literature might be and what is India in broader literary context. See Francesca Orsini, "World Literature, Indian Views", *The Locations of (World Literature)*, eds Francesca Orsini and Laetitia Zecchini (Leiden: Brill, 2024): 76-101. In her contribution to the same volume, Zecchini showed how the Bombay poetic generation in the 1960s claimed equality and reciprocity with other literatures, rather than being "thwarted" by the Western cultural hegemony. See Laetitia Zecchini, "Indian Literature and World Literature Remade. From the PEN All-India Center to Arvind Krishna Mehrotra", *The Locations of World Literature*, 102-126.
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
3. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
4. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).
5. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
6. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953).
7. Even the latest publications striving to globalise literary theory seem to be quite limited in their Western-centric scope, giving the impression that, although literature is diverse and widespread in its manifestations, the only available theory is still the predominantly Western construct, with such chapters as postcolonial studies, psychoanalysis, or phenomenology. Those theoretical frameworks are supposed to transcend national boundaries and contribute to a shared intellectual discourse. See Jeffrey R. Di Leo, ed., *Theory as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025).
8. Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 25.
9. Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 161.
10. Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016): 5.
11. See Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso Books, 2013).
12. Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), xvii.
13. Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
14. The adjective "transcolonial" began to be used in the late 1990s to describe colonial transfers or solidarities between colonised elites in regions with strong pre-colonial ties, such as Southeast Asia or the Maghreb. It can also refer to interactions or exchanges between different colonies, whether within the same empire or across different colonial empires. Nonetheless, the recent elaboration of the notion of transcoloniality goes in a different direction.

15. See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
16. Joseph C. Agbakoba and Marita Rainsborough, eds. *Beyond Decolonial African Philosophy: Africanity, Afrotopia, and Transcolonial Perspectives* (London – New York: Routledge, 2024).
17. Ubuntu is an African philosophical concept that emphasises communalism, interconnectedness, and shared humanity. The term comes from the Nguni Bantu languages of Southern Africa (e.g., Zulu and Xhosa), and it is often translated as: “I am because we are” or: “A person is a person through other persons”. At its core, Ubuntu promotes values such as compassion, reciprocity, dignity, respect, and harmony in social relationships. It is influential in African ethics, political theory, theology, and education—and has gained international attention, particularly through figures like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, who invoked Ubuntu in post-apartheid South African reconciliation efforts.
18. Ewa A. Łukaszuk, “(Post)colonial chronopolitics and mapping the depth of local time(s) in global literary studies: an itinerary to Guinea-Bissau,” *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 7.2 (2021): 69-83.
19. The expression “the global babble” has been coined by Janet Abu-Lughod and frequently employed ever since in the debate on World Literature as a standardised literary form, often created with globalised market, translation, and circulation in mind. See Janet Abu-Lughod, “Going Beyond Global Babble,” in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991): 131–138.
20. José Mendes Moreira, *Fulas do Gabú* (Bissau: Centro de Estudos da Guiné Portuguesa, 1948): 264 ff.
21. This misleading idea of Guinea-Bissau as an “empty space” originally appeared in Manuel Ferreira, *No Reino de Caliban: Antologia Panorâmica da Poesia Africana de Expressão Portuguesa* (Lisboa: Plátano, 1975): 319.
22. See f.ex. Pires Laranjeira, *Literatura Calibanesca* (Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 1985), 10, where the author defends that “simply by being written in European languages, African literature stems from the aftermath of colonialism. In other words: without colonialism, without the discoveries and overseas expansion, it would not have been possible”.
23. Mélanie Bourlet, “Cosmopolitanism, Literary Nationalisms, and Linguistic Activism. A Multi-local Perspective on Pulaar,” in *The Locations of (World) Literature*, 40.
24. Baylaa Kulibali, *Nguurndam tumaranke* (Paris: Binndi e jannde, 1991).
25. Bourlet, “Cosmopolitanism...”, 45.

KRISHANU SINGH, SHUCHI AGRAWAL
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WITCHCRAFT, JUDGEMENT AND CULTURAL PERCEPTION: THE CASE OF JHARKHAND

INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft has been the focus of widespread controversy, denunciation and critique as a way of living and social phenomenon for centuries. In the state in India with the largest Adivasi Indigenous population, Jharkhand, the belief in witchcraft cannot be distinguished from native religiosity, tradition and rule. This has resulted in widespread persecution of women, the impact of which has been social ostracism, physical abuse and deprivation. This article is about the witchcraft phenomenon in Jharkhand, which involves judgement both psycho-legally and sociologically, where knowledge about witchcraft sways between condemnation, scepticism and cultural relativism. The social and historical context of belief in witchcraft in Jharkhand can be traced back to Indigenous animistic beliefs, where supernatural agencies are interpreted to be part and parcel of illness and bad luck.¹ Colonial juridical imposition sought to go around or suppress such practices like superstition, irrespective of their socio-cultural significance.² Post-colonial legal action like the Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001, has sought to criminalise witch-hunting but not to subvert the socio-economic and gendered structures upon which it is based. Thus, contravening the law, violence related to witchcraft occurs frequently and more so against vulnerable females like widows and women who are property/wealth holders. Judgement of witchcraft occurs at the community level, being an instrument of social control in reaction to inter-personal conflict, economic hardship or unforeseen events such as epidemics and crop loss. Witch-hunting is gendered insofar as patriarchal states co-opt supernatural belief to exercise power and disproportionately accuse and victimise women.³ Government offices in the court system mostly fail to make effective interventions in native knowledge systems.⁴ Institutions decentre belief in witchcraft to superstition instead of situating them in their theological and social contexts. Feminist scholars demonstrate that witch-hunting is nothing more than an exercise of patriarchal domination, further projecting domination over women's bodies and estates,⁵ and argue that cultural relativism should not be used as an excuse for violence in a gendered environment. Native activists, however, warn against foreign interventions that disrespect traditional law.

This article examines how the remedies walk a tightrope between the application of law and of good cultural, community-based ways of generating awareness without estranging the local people. The issue of judgement in the public sphere is also considered. The public narrative regarding witch-hunting in Jharkhand alternates between outrage and sensationalism, presenting Adivasi society as uncivilised and affirming state interventionist narratives.⁶ What prevails is an intellectual reluctance to morally condemn Indigenous practice in anticipation of the spectre of colonial overlordship.⁷ We note the failure of repressive measures, while also arguing that instead of suppressing judgement in and of itself, one must practice a reflexive and self-reflexive judgement that acknowledges socio-historical conditions of witchcraft violence and calls for justice.⁸ While legal prohibition is called for, it will prove inadequate unless backed by grass-roots activity aimed at the socio-economic vulnerabilities behind witchcraft accusations. Education, consultation with healers and economic empowerment of women have been able to stem harmful practices from within Indigenous ranks.⁹ These represent a move away from external condemnation towards self-improvement.

In the majority of cases, legal and intellectual accounts of witchcraft are based on the assumption that it is illogical. We argue that context-specific knowledge is required to critically confront institutions that promote witch-hunting. In repositioning the categories of judgement, this study eschews the tradition-modernity dualism and moves toward cosmopolitan community-based responses that are capable of holding together both systems of belief and their socio-political impacts.

WITCHCRAFT AND THE SOCIAL

In Jharkhand, witchcraft is an outcome of ancient animistic traditions that express the world in terms of a combination of spiritual and material causality. Witchcraft is not symbolic but lived and acted upon in Adivasi everyday life.

Supernatural explanations are not peripheral or meaningless in these societies but right at the centre of accounts of illness, bad luck or sudden change. These accounts are based on psychological, social and indeed ecological purposes. Witchcraft-oriented practice is an elaborate concept of judgement in Jharkhand.

Judgement in this case is a multi-modal practice: it is understood in terms of state law and policing, popular opinion, academic critique, mass media representation and internal community mediation. All these sites of judgement are grounded in implicit presuppositions concerning reasonableness, justice, cultural decency and gender conventions. Witchcraft is a contested site where epistemology, gender politics, juridical systems and cultural identity meet.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES

Witch-hunting has gained visibility through acts of parliament passed to criminalise abusers and instances of mob violence in the media across India. These representations nevertheless paint too reductionist a picture of the submerged human cost of such activity, especially in states like Jharkhand, where witch-hunting is gendered cultural violence. For the most common victims, Adivasi women, witchcraft charges do not only result in physical harm or public embarrassment; they reverberate across generations,

injuring victims, their families and communities.¹⁰ The greatest impact is most likely psychological. Survivors report ongoing fear, nightmares and what can be clinically diagnosed as PTSD symptoms.¹¹ The majority of such people maintain a hyper-vigilant state, staying away from crowds, strangers or village crowds, anticipating being attacked again. One woman, for example, has described mob violence that kept recurring in her mind, always there; she continued to hear raised voices and the sounds of bludgeoning sticks. Others admitted to staying away from close contact with society, even friendly neighbours, since they no longer felt secure outside. The trauma is compounded further by the fact that rural Jharkhand lacks access to mental health care. Ojhas (traditional healers) are poorly trained to deal with psychiatric emergencies and state hospitals are not accessible in remote tribal areas.¹²

The worst after-effect is likely to be stigmatisation, which, as anthropologist Erving Goffman famously theorised, is a form of exclusion and control that reveals more about social norms than about the person who is perceived to have violated them.¹³ Once someone is labelled a Dayan (witch), the label follows them even in the absence of evidence. Survivors are socially boycotted, excluded from parties and even from communal wells to draw water. All such stigmatisation is passed on to family members.¹⁴ A Woman's suspected daughters and sons are abhorred; young men remain unmarried because families do not want to be associated with one who has a link to a 'witch.' Stigma results in witch-hunting becoming inter-generational. Jharkhand witch stigma is a state of constant exclusion of women to the outskirts of society and of dehumanisation. Trauma and stigma, alongside suicide behaviour, depression and anxiety are typically observed among survivors. Impacts reach as far as property rights and future generations. Women told human rights researchers they were being pushed out of inherited property rights, a common basis for witch accusations throughout Jharkhand.¹⁵ Widows and unmarried women, already disadvantaged, were targeted so property could pass to men. Survivors' children grew up being teased and ostracised, while girls struggled to marry and boys were frequently forced to move in search of employment.

Witch-hunting therefore has trans-generational impacts, passing on stigma across several decades. This aligns with Silvia Federici's analysis of witch-hunting as linked to economic dispossession and control over women's labour.¹⁶ Jharkhand does enact legislation such as the Prevention of Witch Practices Act (2001), but only criminalises the perpetrators once violence has erupted. There is little help for survivors to reintegrate into society. Top-down legal approaches tend to be culturally tone-deaf and bottom-up ones have no muscle to make fairness stick. The remedy is to bring both to a middle point.

GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF WITCH-HUNTING AND SURVIVOR OUTCOMES

Victims of witch-hunting in Jharkhand are disproportionately women, typically older, widowed, unmarried or otherwise marginalised. Property-owning women are especially at risk because witchcraft provides an acceptable excuse for members of a household or community to appropriate land and property. Aside from economic interests, deviant women, assertive women, economically independent women and otherwise simply 'other' women are more likely to become victims of witchcraft accusations.

Witch-hunting in this way is thus a technology of social control, reaffirming gendered power through displacement and erasure of non-conforming women. As Silvia Federici explains in her *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), early modern European witch-hunting was not mere hysteria but a rational attempt to remake gender relationships during the emergence of capitalism, often through dispossession and domination of women's bodies and labour: "Survivors' testimonies reveal that witch-hunting is not merely an eruption of superstition but a structured continuum of gendered violence, dispossession and social death—yet even within such extremity, women's agency persists in forms of resistance, resilience and testimony."¹⁷ There are parallels here with Jharkhand: land disputes, deconstruction of community institutions and penetration of industrial and market forces into tribal economies follow witch-hunting too. Accusations delegitimise women's leadership in general, usurp goods from them and re-impose patriarchal control. Survivor testimonies confirm the fact that witch-hunting is not just gendered violence but a continuum of structural oppression. It short-circuits trust amongst Adivasi societies, where collective labour and sharing of resources is key to survival. Witch hunting thus unravels not only the life of women, but the very fabric of society which it claims to protect.

Chandra Mohanty cautions against the stereotype of Global South women as passive victims: "twice over, the indigenous women are being victimised, firstly by society that demonises them and renders them other, and secondly by media and state discourses that reduce them to mere victims of 'backward superstition' and erase their agency and complex lived lives."¹⁸ Indigenous women belong to the custodians of traditional knowledge, natural protectors of nature and resources, and protecting their rights and land is therefore crucial. But all are not passive survivors. Some turn their experiences into activism, use NGOs to get visibility and speak for other victims to counter patriarchal structures from within. Their testimonies keep alive the truth that even an extreme position of marginalisation, women's agency persists.

The Jharkhand witchcraft accusations resonate outside panchayats (village councils) and courts. They ring out in public policy, in the news and in the academy. Survivor accounts expose the fact that witch-branding is not a passing irrational episode but a culture-allowed process which rearranges lives for generations. In the Jharkhand example, it is important to withstand the temptation to succumb to blanket judgement or cultural relativism and instead direct critical judgement towards the socio-historical factors that lead to witch-hunting violence. Critical judgement must navigate between respect for indigenous viewpoints on the one hand and critical scrutiny of gendered reproduction of harm on the other.

The news media is a powerful site of judgement. Reportage of witch-hunting in Jharkhand oscillates between sensationalism and moral outrage. Violence is sensationalised in headlines, unleashing violence in all its ferocity and magnitude, and is liable to portray Adivasi societies as the very epitome of savagery or barbarity, situating them eternally in the position of being the subject of state redemption. This form of reporting is typical of colonial stereotypes: just as English officials used to construct Indigenous practices as examples of savagery in justification of 'missions to civilise,' media today places them in the realm of irrationality, in need of redemption by modernity. This type of representation obscures structural drivers of witch-hunting—poverty, gender discrimination, land

conflicts and poor health care—framing it in terms of cultural pathology. It also mutes survivors, removing faces, survivor accounts of trauma survival and resilience. Prioritising spectacle over context, media representation also predetermines response. Administrators and politicians, bound to public opinion, resort to repressive measures: harsher punishments, more policing and purity campaigns. Even when such stunts are celebrated as action, they only stunt the cultural, gendered and economic streams that feed witch-hunting. Moreover, they can disempower communities further by portraying their beliefs as harmless obstructions to progress. The politics of judgement in Jharkhand is hence a multi-scalar process that works from academic criticism to media representation to state response. Each step recycles epistemic hierarchies that determine whose knowledge is audible, whose suffering is legible and whose voices are heard. A more advanced strategy would move away from suspicion, and work towards the kind of ‘participant engagement’ anthropologists recommend working in groups, listening to the survivors themselves and engaging traditional healers and elders in reform efforts. Only reflexively and dialogically can judgement be applied to justice without erasing cultural identity.

INDIGENOUS AND FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS

The brutality of witch-hunting and the reductionist statements of state policy and media have attracted Indigenous and feminist resistance. This does not take the form of elite reformist or retributionist movements, but reform from within, cultural understanding and gender justice. Jharkhand’s Indigenous activists are resisting stereotypical denunciation of their tradition and embracing the belief that traditional norms of healing and justice can be mobilised in order to negate witch-branding. The panchayats, for instance, have been instructed to resolve disputes without the use of witchcraft accusations. Even the traditional healers, otherwise at the forefront of reforming witchcraft beliefs, have married awareness campaigns with their ability to delegitimise abuse and lead communities into reconciliation. Feminist organisations, like the Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives (AALI) and Mahila Samakhya, have organised legal literacy campaigns, raised awareness on women’s rights and offered direct assistance to victims. Their interventions reject the polemical framing of witch-hunting as superstition and present instead an account of witch-hunting as structural gender violence informed by property dispossession, patriarchal domination and the silencing of women. By putting survivors’ dignity and rights first, feminist praxis stands against patriarchal violence and the cultural relativism that legitimates it. One dramatic change is how survivors are represented. Instead of showing them as passive victims of superstition, feminist and indigenous social movements point to the agency, leadership and resourcefulness of women in resisting change.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND THE LIMITS OF CRIMINALISATION

The dominant framework for addressing the ancient issue of witch-hunting in India during the post-independence period is that of national and state legislation. In Jharkhand, the Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 2001, de facto criminalises the act of announcing someone to be a witch and any ensuing acts of violence or exclusion. The Act was a significant step towards accepting witch-hunting as a violation of human rights

rather than a cultural aberration. It came with a much-needed codification of law for prosecuting perpetrators and safeguarding the victims. However, despite its virtues, the Act does possess some grave faults. One of the most important ones is that it frames customary responses to accusations of witchcraft as matters of irrational belief, rather than cultivating an understanding of how deeply they are inscribed in social hierarchies, economic conflict and violence against women.¹⁹ The legal system treats the symptom, violence, but not the structural source of the phenomenon.²⁰ For instance, most accusations are based on land and property disputes, with women targeted by relatives or neighbours seeking to dispossess them. We have noted that these tendencies reflect the fact that witch-hunting is significantly gendered and socio-economically motivated. The law itself does nothing to address these root causes. Furthermore, the law has been enforced sporadically and, much too frequently, inadequately. Local police officers are too frequently unaware of provisions of the Act or even themselves are engaged in the activities the Act aims to criminalise. There are various accounts of the police ignoring complaints, not registering First Information Reports (FIRs) or advising victims to reconcile with their accusers rather than pursuing the case through the legal system. In some cases, law enforcers share the same cultural perception about witchcraft and thus do not want to act appropriately. Victims of witch-branding suffer extreme social persecution and justice, or even support and basic provisions, becomes difficult to seek. Even after being cleared of witchcraft by the court of law, the accused struggle to gain any sense of normality in their lives. The fear of vengeance, harassment and psychical traumatisation propels them into flight and further victimisation. Moreover, the judicial mechanism most often fails to provide such cases with the dignity and urgency that they deserve. Hearings are delayed, evidence is dismissed as hearsay and the burden of proof squarely rests on the victim. In rural society, where the evidence is going to be anecdotal and the social pressure will be severe, the justice system will appear foreign and powerless. Management of the process and attempts at legal reform have also not been accompanied by mass mobilisation. Various NGOs and human rights organisations try actively to counter witch-hunting by conducting community education and legal aid and assisting survivors. There is nevertheless usually a lag between these initiatives and those of the state actors. For law such as in the Prevention of Witch Practices Act to be effective, there should be accompanying education campaigns, access to health, psychological counselling and economic empowerment programs.

PEOPLE-LED AND GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES

The most effective means of countering witch-hunting in Jharkhand are those actions that are emerging from below, amongst the masses themselves. Grassroots movements understand that programmes constructed from above are always going to remain culturally insensitive and are not integrated with local realities. Grassroots movements are participative-centric, educative-centric and empowerment-centric in the long term. One involves keepers of indigenous knowledge, including healers and elders, in education initiatives. Activists and NGOs can speak out by employing the authority of individuals who are already extremely well regarded in the village and not associated with outsider organisations. Healers, for example, can be enlisted to refute witchcraft allegations and campaign against other causes of illness and catastrophe. Both community theatre and oral tradition have also been engaged,

because they incorporate native cultural practice and provide a route along which challenging material can be led to the open air of argument. Mock dramas on the dangers of witch-hunting, the implications in law enforcement and women's rights are re-staged in village squares and during festivals and assist in provoking dialogue and self-reflection. Education, particularly children and youth education, is at the centre of such initiatives. Schools that incorporate gender equality, human rights and critical thinking education render the seeds of the values of witch-hunting null and void. In addition, peer education initiatives, where older students educate younger students on such matters, have proven effectiveness.

Economic empowerment is the other key pillar. Grassroots programmes aid women's self-help groups, micro-financing programs and vocational training, such as *Mukhyamantri Maiya Samman Yojana* (providing monthly cash remunerations to women), *Mukhyamantri Abua Swasthya Surakhsha Yojana* (hospitalisation), *Savitribai Phule Kishori Samridhi Yojana* (supporting female students) and *Mukhyamantri Rojgaar Srijan Yojana* (advances to small business owners). These schemes reduce economic reliance and social exposure, thus keeping women away from being the target of accusation. Where they are integrated socially and economically independent, then they are better placed to defend themselves and each other. Community-based conflict resolution mechanisms include trained community mediators who can intervene in cases of conflict and prevent them from escalating into witch accusations. These mechanisms are likely to fill gaps in legal aid cells with the added advantage of rapid response to victims and access points to the judiciary.

Success at the grassroots level is founded on striking a balance between respect for the cultural environment and adherence to justice and equity. Instead of dismissing older beliefs as irrational, they seek to reinterpret and re-orient them in the cause of social cohabitation and human rights. They do not restrict but enable internal reflection and transformation. Overall, state responses and media coverage have been seen to shy away from the richness of Jharkhand's cultural attitudes to witchcraft and witch-hunting. Feminist, grassroots and indigenous movements provide less destructive options through attention to local knowledge, empowerment and participation. They further bring out the fact that the battle against witch-hunting will not be fought effectively with punishment, but will have to address the phenomenon using knowledge, participation and ongoing people's action.

RETHINKING TRADITION AND MODERNITY

The discussion of Jharkhand witchcraft is caught up in the dualism of modernity/tradition and rationality/superstition. Not only does this oversimplify the issue, but it is likely to reinstall forms of colonial logic that have historically oppressed Indigenous knowledge. An effective response to the issue is likely to be one transcends such a dualism and appreciates that tradition and modernity are not static enemies but living, superposed structures. Adivasi religions are not reactionary or unyielding but contextual, adaptive and reformist in character.²¹ Religious accounts of witchcraft and healing in Jharkhand tribal societies cannot be separated from social life, farm labour and social faith. They are an epistemology and ethics system governing action among human beings and social responsibility. When action takes a negative shape, like witch-

hunting, it must be contested. The challenge is to act without deconstructing the larger cultural systems out of which the issue developed. Legal systems themselves are not context-free or autonomous. The Indian legal system, as it has been shaped by post-Enlightenment rationalist and colonial thought, criminalises behaviour that it finds to be irrational. In doing so, the system is at a remove from the socio-cultural etymology of such behaviour. While, for instance, legal measures like the Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act are, in theory, violence-free, they fail unless they function in the space of socio-cultural, on-the-ground realities.

One alternative is the philosophy of legal pluralism, a strategy which embraces multiple sources of legitimacy and promotes co-existence of official statutory law and non-official, community-based systems of justice. In Jharkhand, this would involve the creation of a hybrid legal system in which state law and the moral power of customary law are brought into harmony. Village committees, traditional leaders and local healers could play a crucial role in diffusing tension and resolving conflicts. This mixed-method framework would also necessitate an ethic of learning from one another and respecting each other. Policy makers and attorneys must learn Indigenous languages to effectively hear and speak. Activists and NGOs are facilitators to the process and can intervene within a rights-based approach but also become culturally embedded. Rather than the reservoirs of Indigenous knowledge being considered barriers to modernity, they can be mobilised to enrich contemporary jurisprudence and governance. New feminist and legal values, on the other hand, need to be translated into culturally meaningful language translatable in local languages. This cross-adaptation is not compromise but a policy of more ethically and sustainably anchored reform.

CONCLUSION

Jharkhand witch-hunting highlights the limitations of top-down intervention. Instead of being simply a result of superstition or backwardness, it is one of overdetermined cultural, socio-historical, gendered and socio-economic factors. Punitive law is necessary but insufficient; it must be read imaginatively from the socio-historical frames in which such beliefs function. Law reform to ban witch-branding and attendant violence is appropriate, but needs to be supplemented and followed by reflexive, grassroots interventions. Judgement by legal, academic and media standards should be guided by reflexivity, humility and receptiveness to diverse forms of knowledge. Acknowledgment of the epistemic agency of pre-colonial Indigenous world knowledges is not approval of violence, but explanation of why and how it happens. Shifting the lexicon of judgement means looking past the tradition-modernity binary. We are presented with a vision for observing witchcraft not as quaint but as a hermeneutic with which to interpret our world today, a looking-glass in which to look at our own inequalities, our own resistances and our own phobias. In this way, we look forward to an end to the violence of witch-hunting and towards a more equitable and inclusive world.

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ISABELLA LEPOAMO

TENDER MONUMENTS – SACRED ORDINARY REVISITED

THE OBJECTS ARE NEVER JUST OBJECTS
THE BUCKET IS A PRAYER
THE CAN IS A MEMORY
WE BUILD ALTARS OUT OF TRASH
A RETURN TO ORIGIN
THE HUM OF THE DIASPORA
A LOVE LETTER IN COMMODITY FORM
A CRITIQUE WRAPPED IN SATIN
WE MAKE MEANING THROUGH MATTER
WE MAKE GODS OUT OF KITSCH

THE THEMES ARE ALWAYS THE SAME
BELONGING – MEMORY – RESISTANCE
AN OBSESSION WITH THE INVISIBLE
THE ACHE TO BE FELT – TO BE SEEN

ACTS OF CARE

I grew up understanding love through actions, through food. For Samoans in Aotearoa, visiting someone's house means bringing something to share. No one leaves hungry. At family dinners, children are served first, their plates loaded, as a gesture of care. We collect *kai moana* together, we prepare food together, and we cook together even when the ingredients come in a Salvation Army box. Despite displacement, these rituals continue in the New Zealand context, where traditional language, clothing and ceremony are sometimes absent, transferred from traditional kitchens to plastic trays and foil wraps. Food is one of our strongest living ties to cultural identity. I've seen it in my Thai flatmate, in my Māori whānau and in many diasporic communities. Everyday practices quietly hold people together. My art emerges from a space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews are in constant dialogue. It is a space shaped by the

principles of Te Ao Māori, the persistence of Māori activism and the responsibilities that come with inhabiting this whenua. Because this place is unsettled, active and contested, I, as a base line, have the freedom to create in ways that feel both anchored and exploratory—a freedom I acknowledge as a privilege. In many parts of the world, political thought that challenges the status quo is not only discouraged but actively suppressed. The ability to question, reflect and speak through creative practice is not something I take for granted. It's about recognising the layered context I live in, where Te Tiriti o Waitangi offers an ongoing framework for negotiation and responsibility, but where my values as an artist are also grounded in simple, inherited acts of love, sharing and survival.

This article is a reflection on my installation at the Dunedin School of Art in November 2024. Taking the form of a personal, autoethnographic narrative, it counters a reading of the work's various packaged-food-related objects that draws only from critical theory. That intellectual reading, I suggest, is liable to result in the judgement of a marginalised cultural group as passive consumers of inauthentic mass-produced commodities. I argue instead for embracing the contradictions the items embody, whereby they are equally signs of disconnection and connection for Samoan New Zealand families.

The installation, *Sacred ordinary*, used everyday objects to explore the intersection of memory, family and cultural heritage and consumerism. Bronze hands, a life cast of my grandfather's hands, poured water into a KFC bucket, a symbol of commodified culture transformed into a vessel of tradition. A bronze kava bowl, a family heirloom, symbolised the continuity of Samoan rituals. Fragile fish-and-chips paper, painted with a Samoan turtle in *lama* (traditional ink), replaced bark-cloth tapa, emphasizing the delicate balance between preserving cultural identity and adapting to contemporary life. The turtle, a symbol of family in Samoan mythology, reinforced the theme of heritage. A coconut tree, constructed from coconut cream cans, symbolised the blending of tradition with the realities of immigrant life in New Zealand, while a self-portrait in plasticine served as a reference to my childhood. Objects drawn from my upbringing became symbols of both familial legacy and the tension between modernity and cultural preservation, embodying the personal and collective experience of navigating displacement, memory and belonging.

THE INVISIBLE

Tensions of ancestry, of place, of accountability are not resolved in my work, but instead held open. The art becomes a space where contradictions are welcomed and allowed to sit alongside each other, where judgement is suspended and where I try to honour the mana of the communities and legacies I'm in relationship with.

My curiosity about people, what shapes their experiences and brings them together, has been a way to make sense of myself. What I find so powerful about exploring this through making art is that it gives language to the intangible, the unseen emotional and spiritual spaces that exist between individuals. These spaces are often difficult to grasp, especially when we are young, yet they shape so much of how we connect and interact.

ISABELLA LEPOAMO, SACRED ORDINARY,
2024. SITE. INSTALLATION VIEWS

Photographs: © Zac Whiteside.















Culture itself is built on these spaces and interactions, on the invisible threads of influence that shape our perceptions and the fluid nature of human connection, like spilled milk: warm, messy and somehow always landing on the one thing you cared about.

Finding my voice as an artist has often felt risky. I internalised the pressure to sound 'critical,' to make work that fitted neatly within academic discourses. There's a kind of safety in aligning your language with theory, in quoting the right thinkers, in appearing clever. But I began to question what gets excluded when emotional sincerity, cultural memory or even so-called 'naïve' approaches are treated as intellectually suspect. In that sense, the risk wasn't about rejecting academic frameworks altogether, but about confronting their provisional limits and learning to let things in that might be seen as sentimental, uncritical or even embarrassing. That's where the work started to feel honest. I'm not making art to prove I understand theory. I make it to stay connected to the people and stories I care about—my family, my history, my community. The work comes from love. And sometimes, love feels like the most radical thing I can offer.

MIRRORS AND MONUMENTS

Early on, I learned how easily certain kinds of aesthetic experience were dismissed as 'low,' 'ugly' or 'kitsch.' I remember being told that the subject matter of Pop Art was tacky, that objects like canned goods or celebrity memorabilia had no place in serious discourse. It made me feel ashamed; the things I'd grown up with, the things I loved, were signs of bad taste. This was devastating, because I had excellent taste in two-minute noodles and celebrity perfume. The shame, though, was formative. It taught me how ideology operates not just through discursive frameworks but through feeling—through embarrassment, pride, recognition and rejection. This did not lead me to reject academic frameworks altogether. Rather, I wanted to find the ones that resonated with my lived experience.

The word 'kitsch' comes from German, from the nineteenth century, where *verkitschen* meant 'to cheapen' or 'make trashy.' It has been used to draw a line between 'authentic' art and mass-produced commodity culture. Think of Theodor Adorno or Clement Greenberg, who saw kitsch as the manipulative 'other' of 'high art.'¹ But others, from Pop artists to postmodern theorists, have unsettled this binary, showing how those distinctions are socially produced and ideologically loaded.

When I first proposed using KFC iconography in my work, specifically the iconic red-and-white share buckets, I was cautioned against it. I was told it might come across as stereotypical, even offensive, if it suggests that people from displaced cultures are vulnerable to the cheap products of global corporations, compelled to consume what can only do them harm. That critique left me feeling unexpectedly sad. For me, those buckets weren't ironic props or aesthetic shortcuts. They were repositories of memory. They reminded me of Sunday afternoons with my grandfather, family meals where everyone reached in together, laughing, eating, living. The association wasn't abstract, but deeply personal. And, yes, maybe that image of consumption is stereotypical. But is it necessarily an image of failure? Perhaps the problem lies not in the image itself, but in a refusal to see its depth. Dismissing it outright reveals more about Western intellectual discomfort than about the image's meaning in 'other' cultural contexts.

My attitude to post-1960s artists like Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol, who represent items of mass culture, isn't necessarily one of admiration, but of recognition. Their work reveals something unsettling and true: that what we deem 'poor taste' often reflects cultural proximity to working-class or racialised communities, where value is mapped in different ways. A KFC bucket or a piece of fish-and-chip paper is disposable, but that doesn't mean it's devoid of emotional resonance. In displaced Pacific households like the one I grew up in, such items are tied to memory, migration, celebration and survival. These objects sit at the messy intersection of fantasy and materiality. They're not simply tools of capitalist domination. They're that, but they're containers for belonging too. That contradiction is where my practice lives.

Warhol grew up in a working-class immigrant family in Pittsburgh. When he was a child, he spent long stretches sick in bed. To pass the time he cut pictures of celebrities out of magazines, pasting together his own private gallery of mass-produced fame. He also lived off canned tomato soup—literally. His family didn't have much, and a tin of Campbell's was cheap, filling and familiar.² Warhol's art is not full of elite cultural references, but of the everyday stuff of his life. I don't want to speculate too much on what the soup meant to him personally, but what matters is that the image of that can carried weight—a memory folded into the everyday. Warhol never explained his work, never offered a narrative. His simply held a mirror to the world around him, soup cans, Marilyn Monroe and all—the surfaces of mass culture.

Pop Art wasn't just a clever aesthetic. Warhol understood that what's popular, what's mass-produced, is what surrounds us, feeds us and shapes how we see ourselves. That immediacy and specificity—the refusal of narrative—is what made his work so sharp. He turned the everyday into serious cultural currency.



Figures 2 and 2a. Isabella Lepoamo, *New Zealand Commercial Fish Species*.
Photograph: © Zac Whiteside.

NEW ZEALAND COMMERCIAL FISH SPECIES



Crab / *Scapharca murifera*



groper / *Polydora argenteus*



Squid / *Loligo argentata*



Snapper / *Taenia snyderi*



Salmon / *Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*



Bluefin Tuna / *Thunnus orientalis*



Tarakihi - *Nemadostyus macropterus*



Crab mackerel / *Scomber japonicus*



Red Gurnard / *Chelodactylus loxotis*



Crab / *Brachyura*



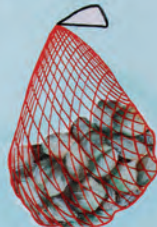
Hoki / *Macrurus novaezealandiae*



Sardine / *Sardinops sagax*



Prawn / *Decapoda cristata*



Lack / *Austrovenus stutchburyi*



Mussel / *Perna canaliculus*



Sea urchin / *Evechinus chloratus*

My own art follows this same thread, but from a slightly different angle. It begins with the fish species posters you see pinned up in fish-and-chip shops around New Zealand—bright grids of snapper, blue cod, crayfish. Instead of painting those species, I replaced them with the versions I have actually encountered: mussels in a supermarket punnet, tuna in a can, frozen fillets in branded plastic. These are the forms that feel most familiar to me, just as Campbell's soup cans did for Warhol. But where his paintings and prints reflected the everyday as it appeared, mine are found objects that I modify and integrate into a particular narrative about a diasporic culture. The changed poster reveals what's been lost—the fresh species replaced by packaged products, the abundance of the sea compressed into brands and barcodes.

FAMILIAR / LOST

Jeff Koons' *Celebration* series, begun in 1993, takes the everyday objects of childhood—balloon dogs, party hats, Play-Doh, cakes, shiny eggs with bows—and blows them up to monumental scale. They're not just toys or decorations anymore, they're memorials to joy itself. Koons has always said he wants to stay positive, to reclaim the things that brought him happiness growing up. Where Warhol painted a soup can, Koons would make it enormous, gleaming, inflatable in spirit—a monument to the ordinary, reframed as something beautiful.

That optimism carries through to works like *Puppy* (1992), a giant dog made of flowers outside the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao. It's a sculpture that requires constant pruning, held together by a self-watering system and an intricate internal frame—the technology behind it is as elaborate as the idea is simple.³ But that's the point: he takes things that are generally and intuitively loved—puppies, flowers—and turns them into obscene spectacles that are alternately enjoyable and uncomfortable. In *Hulk (Tubas)* (2004–18), a giant inflatable of the eponymous Marvel character—scaled to human size but already cartoonishly overblown—is surrounded by massive golden tubas that fan out like peacock feathers. The work is interactive: visitors can come up and blow into the instruments, filling the space with a booming anthem. Hulk's power is multiplied by the audience who bring the sound to life. It's absurd and spectacular. It feels like the anthem of Marvel itself—that massive, inflated culture wave of superheroes and comics we've grown up with. There is no evidence that the piece should be taken as a critique from some 'outside' position.⁴ It reflects the times exactly as they are: proud, shiny, loud and unapologetically inflated.

"I am what I am," Koons says.⁵ If his world was filled with bright, punchy cartoons and consumer objects, then it feels right to him to celebrate and uplift them. Rather than making judgement, both Koons and Warhol unapologetically reflect back what is. And, in a way, we all do, even when we try not to; what we reflect outward is our own participation and embeddedness in commodity culture, even if we seek to critique that culture.

COMFORT COMPLICATED

Like Warhol and Koons, I draw on what's familiar—KFC buckets, fish-and-chip wrappers, fish posters reworked into packaged products. But for me, these objects are also tied to memory, to family, to the traditions I grew up in. In Pacific households, such objects carry values passed down through elders—*alofa* (love), *tautua* (service), *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *feagaiga* (covenant between siblings and others) and *usita'i* (discipline). A bucket of chicken is never just a bucket of chicken; it's part of a gathering, a form of sharing, a vessel for community.

But now, I feel a deep conflict. The materials that once felt comforting and close are also bound up in systems I cannot ignore. Tinfoil, for example, is wrapped in contradictions: coated in plastic, hard to recycle and mined through environmentally destructive processes. What once carried the warmth of my childhood also reminds me how Pacific communities, already displaced, are further entangled in extractive, unsustainable economies. The same is true of food. These meals are tied to joy and belonging, yet they also carry harm: health problems in my own family and corporations that profit from marginalised groups in New Zealand. The stereotype that reduces Pacific people to 'fat and greedy' erases this reality, skipping over the machinery of industrial food systems, the impacts of class and global capitalism's funnelling of cheap, unhealthy products into vulnerable communities, then blaming those very people for the consequences.

I see this so sharply because of the values that shaped me. Growing up, I immersed myself in *Planet Earth* documentaries; I cared about ecosystems and the fragility of life. Later, in my other career as a professional athlete, I had access to nutritionists, health coaches and sports psychologists. Ideas of balance, wellbeing, and respect for the body became part of how I understood myself. So, when I look at a KFC bucket, I see a site where culture, community, memory, health and the environment collide. And I have a conflicted relationship to its materiality. The plastic-coated bucket is like the glossy magazine pages Warhol cut up and Koons' balloon dogs polished to a mirror sheen—all symptoms of the same industrial system that fills landfills and oceans as easily as it fills supermarket shelves. To me, the materials aren't neutral surfaces. They carry the story of extraction, waste and ecological damage beneath their cheerful, mass-produced shine.

DECOHERENCE

My work doesn't sit in pure celebration like Koons, nor in the detached immediacy of Warhol. It reflects the familiar, but it also critiques. It points to what has been lost, what has been imposed and what continues to be overlooked. What I'm interested in is contradiction: unhealthy and joyful, disposable and sacred, capitalist and cultural, everyday and planetary.

At the same time as I was wrestling with kitsch and cultural value, I found myself drawn to the garden—not metaphorically, but literally. I was becoming aware of what I now think of as my own ideological 'filters,' the structures that shape how I perceive not just art, but nature, intimacy and reality itself. Last year, I became acutely aware of my own disconnection, mainly from 'nature,' plants and the non-human, but subsequently, upon reflection, from people, from place, from myself. I wanted to recover the sanctuary

I remembered from childhood, when simply being outside, sitting in the sun or walking through a garden filled me with peace. I understood, intellectually, that I *am* part of nature, that disconnection is an illusion, yet emotionally I felt separate, misaligned.

Unintentionally, it was at Nichol's Garden Centre that this feeling I had been searching for returned to me. Decided to just sit amongst the orderly rows of potted plants in a moment of peace, my body was filled with wistful emotion. I realised this place sparked a nostalgic feeling for Invercargill, the town where I grew up. But it wasn't just Invercargill itself, but the beautiful spaces I shared with family, mainly my grandparents. Nichol's Garden Centre shares a beauty like my grandad's garden, on which he worked tirelessly. The red bricks were the same as the ones at Queen's Gardens and Elizabeth Park, where we fed the ducks. I remembered times when grandad would drive us to McDonald's or Moon's for takeaways to eat back at his place. Ironically, I found all this at Nichol's Garden Centre, a place where 'nature' is arranged in an anthropocentric fashion, organised to meet human needs.

This led me to the concept of plant decoherence, which I've explored as a metaphor for how cultural ideologies 'collapse' the complex, quantum-like multiplicity of living systems into simplified, human-centred categories. Just as decoherence in physics describes how particles lose their quantum potential when observed, so too does our framing of nature through anthropomorphism, commodification, or aesthetic control reduce it to something digestible, manageable and ultimately disconnected from its aliveness.⁶ Even gardening is bound up in this logic. Plants are sorted into categories of 'good' and 'bad,' ornamentals versus weeds, reflecting an aesthetics that is coded middle-class and colonial, rather than ecological imperatives.

Nichol's Garden Centre subconsciously reconnected me with childhood memories of family gardens. These spaces offered a kind of sanctuary. But I am also aware of the capitalist logic at play: garden centres exist to sell. They manufacture and elicit a desire to connect with 'nature'—a desire both authentic and shaped by market forces. The same contradiction also helps me make peace with the memory of fast food.

VESSELS

As an adult, having moved away from quiet Invercargill to study in Dunedin, immersed in intellectual spaces I'd never encountered before, I became ashamed of the things I used to take pride in. The parallels were clear. If garden centres curate what counts as 'nature,' fast food chains curate what counts as 'food.' Both promise sanctuary—a return to something warm, familiar, communal—but both are deeply entangled in capitalist economies. Now, reframing this contradiction in the objects of my childhood, my KFC buckets, fish-and-chip paper or coconut cans aren't simply junk or kitsch; they are alive with meaning because they are part of relational sanctuaries. The KFC buckets I shared with my grandfather aren't symbols of bad taste, but vessels of belonging. My attachment to them isn't ideological failure; it's a human feeling shaped by love.

I remember waiting with mom and aunty until just before 11pm, when KFC was about to close, so we could get extra chicken. We'd drive around 'Invers,' dropping chicken off to family, and receive the same gesture back a week later. These were small rituals, but they meant everything. Within a Western paradigm, and often without full cultural

or physiological adaptation, this tradition of food-sharing is taken advantage of by capitalist models that prey on emotional resonance. The KFC bucket is a commercial innovation marketed specifically toward Pacific communities. Stores are strategically placed in more densely Pacific and lower-income neighbourhoods. This has contributed to disproportionate health issues within Pacific communities, revealing how cultural adaptation can be both empowering and harmful.

In my work, the symbols of the KFC bucket is a modern surrogate for the *kava* bowl, both representing communal values of sharing. But they also expose the paradox of cultural survival, where the attempt to preserve tradition and identity is in tension with stereotypes and worsening health impacts. Living in Aotearoa, I've witnessed how Samoan culture adapts and transforms when displaced into a Western context. Packaging—KFC buckets, coconut cans from Vietnam, fish-and-chip paper, foil takeaway wraps—becomes more than just wrapping. These objects are vessels of memory, meaning and identity for a community striving to maintain connection to home.

Bronze Cast of My Grandfather's Hands (2024) emerged from my fear of losing him—the person who remains my strongest living connection to Samoa. Casting his hands was an attempt to hold on to something I know I will one day have to let go of. It feels miraculous that he is still struggling with his health. Despite the solid weight of the bronze, this work acknowledges that I can never truly preserve him. It's not about stopping time, but about honouring the impermanence of life and the intimacy of memory.

In *My Grandfather's Hands to KFC Fountain* (2024), *suavai* (water), the spirit of life, becomes the central force. In Samoan belief, and across the Pacific, water is not passive. It is its own being, both spiritual and physical: a cleanser, a sustaining force that renews and baptises. When my grandfather's hands pour water into the pyramid of KFC buckets, the act elevates them. The buckets are no longer just disposable containers or symbols of 'poor taste.' Through water, they are temporarily sanctified, placed on a higher status as vessels of community and care. The spirit of life brings vitality into objects otherwise seen as kitsch and stereotypical, low and off-putting. It washes and reclaims them. For me, this is not metaphor alone, but belief: water acts as an agent, a living force that carries alofa (love), tautua (service), fa'aaloalo (respect), feagaiga (covenant) and usita'i (discipline). By allowing water to flow through the buckets, I'm trying to contextualise and reclaim the stereotypes that flatten Pacific imagery into clichés. Instead, the work repositions them as complex cultural signifiers, containers of memory and community. The piece is not only about loss and mourning, but also about renewal through the life-giving force of *suavai*.

CURRENTS

Jane Bennett's philosophy of vital materialism, outlined in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010), argues that matter is not inert but alive.⁷ Bennett writes about how non-human materials and things, as small as metals or food scraps and as vast as waterways and power grids, have their own agency, constantly shaping the world around us. In her view, water isn't a passive backdrop. It is an active participant in the web of life: it carves landscapes, sustains ecosystems, influences cultures and holds political weight in struggles over access and use. Water has meaning and vitality beyond its utilitarian function.

Bennett's text is received as rigorous philosophy, taught in universities, cited in academic texts (just as I am compelled to cite it here). For me, that is both affirming and frustrating. Affirming, because I recognise in her language something I already know: *suavai* is not just a resource but a spirit, a life-force with its own agency. Frustrating, because when I say the same thing—that I was baptised in water, that it cleanses and renews, that it carries values of *alofa*, *tautua*, *fa'aaloalo*, *feagaiga*, and *usita'i*—it risks being dismissed as cultural, sentimental or naïve. Bennett's philosophy and my Pasifika belief system align, but hers is legitimised, while mine is marginalised.⁸

This tension becomes clearer when I think about Judy Watson's work. Watson, a Waanyi artist from northwest Queensland, also treats water as an active collaborator in her practice. In Waanyi language, one aspect of water is called *dumularra*—the current, the flowing water. For Watson, this current carries not only vitality but also memory, including the painful histories of her family. She works with water directly: soaking and staining canvases, letting it shape her pigments, acknowledging its presence as an agent in the work.

Watson's understanding of water is grounded in Waanyi traditions, where land, water, and kinship cannot be separated. For generations, Aboriginal water knowledge has guided seasonal use, sharing practices and community relationships. These values are central to spiritual connection and survival. Unlike Western law, which divides land and water into separate entities, Aboriginal knowledge systems insist that water is inseparable from Country, bound into creation stories and the responsibilities of care.⁹ Yet, like Pasifika belief systems, this knowledge is often undervalued until it can be reframed in Western terms, whether as philosophy, environmental science or commercial research value. Institutions are quick to seek out 'Aboriginal water knowledge' for climate models or new ecological insights, but slow to recognise the spiritual and cultural frameworks that hold that knowledge in place.

Bennett, Watson and my own practice are all speaking to water's vitality—but from different genealogies. Bennett writes it as theory, Watson paints it through Waanyi heritage, I work with it as *suavai*, the spirit of life.

CARRYING BOTH ACROSS

Water has always been central in my life, not just symbolically, but physically, socially and emotionally. Some of my earliest and strongest memories are of being with my family at the beach, collecting *kai moana*, swimming, laughing, eating. The ocean was our meeting place, our playground, our pantry. Later in life, I became a professional swimmer and synchronised swimmer, deepening this connection. Water became my medium, my discipline and my grounding. It held me, challenged me and taught me rhythm, stillness and flow. But, in contrast to Bennett's theorisation of water as a vibrant, relational force, the currents of meaning that sustain me, rooted in family, culture and emotion, are liable to be judged as sentimental. Is sentimentality necessarily naïve? What makes an artwork—one, say, that emerges from this sentimentality—either kitsch and 'bad taste' or of intellectual substance? When are images of Pacific life taken as clichés or read as complex cultural signifiers? My work explores these dualities.

The word 'philistine' is an old insult used for centuries to sneer at people who supposedly don't understand art. In their 2002 book, *The Philistine Controversy*, Dave Beech and John Roberts suggest that philistine modes of attention and representation, on the part of artists and audiences alike, have value in relation to contemporary art insofar as they have the potential to unsettle social hierarchies.¹⁰ They argue that identifying philistinism—branding someone or something tasteless, crude or outside culture—tells us less about the so-called philistine and more about the way art worlds police their boundaries. Judgements of taste are never just about taste; they're about drawing lines between insiders and outsiders, between those with cultural capital and those without, and being blind to the overlaps and contradictions that confound such simplistic distinctions.

It is interesting to me when my work has been regarded as being at risk of being 'obvious' or 'sentimental.' These descriptions line up with other judgements, such as 'unrefined,' 'too simple,' 'not up to standard.' They reveal something about the cultural positions from which judgements are made. Rather than reject these labels, I began to consider how an artwork might disrupt the cultural gatekeeping of contemporary art. In embracing objects and imagery considered lowbrow or stereotypical, I wasn't being defiant; I was trying to re-centre a language of art-making that spoke to the lives of people like my family, who feel like they can't engage with a lot of contemporary art. After all, the visual language that surrounds them, from takeaway menus to church hall posters, might not be gallery-curator-approved, but it's rich with care, humour and meaning. I am reminded of a comment by Samoan New Zealand photographer Edith Amituanai in 2009: "I do have to live with this work, with my family and friends, so I have to remember that I can't make work that they don't believe and I don't believe. I can imagine that if I were to do something that really was contemporary art—whatever that is—I'd just get laughed at in my house."¹¹ Amituanai admitted at the time to feeling 'embarrassed' about her relationship to the art world, but she has been consistent in basing her work in the social and material realities of Pasifika culture, without losing face as a 'contemporary artist.'

Here I think about Frantz Fanon, whose writing put language to something I was already living. Fanon, a psychiatrist and philosopher from Martinique, wrote in his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* about internalised inferiority, the psychological violence of colonialism.¹² Fanon insists that the colonised subject is taught to mistrust their own image, taste, body, language and culture—a process I recognised not just in the classroom, but in how I had come to doubt the cultural value of the objects that surrounded me growing up. I remember being afraid to be seen with my mum in certain spaces because she was brown, because people treated us differently when we were together. If I was on my own, or with other parents, I wasn't treated the same way. I think it echoed the pressure to adopt the ways of this place, to erase parts of ourselves in order to fit in. Perhaps my dyslexia also added to that internalised inferiority. As a kid, my mum would remind me that my brain was "wired differently" because of it. She meant it kindly, but it added to the quiet suspicion that I was operating slightly askew from everyone else. It fits with Fanon's internalised, psychological violence: the way you come to experience yourself as the problem, failing to line up with the world's expectations. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek might call it the comedy of subjectivity, where even your own mind comes with a user manual you can't quite read.¹³

When I entered art school, I felt like I had stepped into another world. People spoke in a language of books, films and exhibitions I didn't recognise, and I assumed the problem was me. My background, my family, our food, our humour felt like it could never measure up. No one told me outright I didn't belong; the coldness of the space said enough. Warmth and familiarity no longer seemed to count. Maybe that's why I turned to the symbols that were familiar—the KFC buckets, fish-and-chip posters and takeaway menus.

MATERIALS THAT BEHAVE

If *suavai* let me see how meaning flows through a bucket, the rest of the works in the installation—from foil and coconut cans to bronze and plasticine—asked me to pay attention to how materials themselves move, resist, hold and change. I was drawn to materials like aluminium foil and coconut cream cans not just for what they represent, but for how they behave. Tinfoil is like water; its shimmer and fragility, the way it bends and holds, feels alive. It carries itself with a quiet insistence. The coconut cream cans—too shiny, resilient, mass-produced, yet intimate—seem to store memories, relating to my own associations with family meals and the material traces they accumulate over time.

Growing up, I learned about cooking from a family in the Islands using coconut leaves, banana leaves and fresh coconuts, all of which returned to the land. That practice was cyclical, respectful and holistic. But here in Aotearoa, those materials are often out of reach. What replaces them are industrial substitutes: tinfoil instead of leaves, canned cream instead of fresh. The tree I've created is both a tribute and a critique. It speaks to the creativity and resilience of Pacific families who continue to uphold cultural practices using what's available. But it also points to the cost of that adaptation: the severed relationship with land, the environmental compromises we absorb and the tension of living between worlds. The coconut tree, reconstructed from non-traditional and unsustainable materials, tries to hold on to its original function as a 'tree of life—but it does so imperfectly. That imperfection is the point. Why are leaves read as 'authentic' and tinfoil as 'cheap,' when both can carry the same ritual labour?

UNFINISHED

From there, I moved to another material: plasticine. A self-portrait sculpted from white plasticine—a direct return to the first sculptural material I ever encountered—represents me at nine years old. The figure is unpolished, small, reaching toward my grandfather's bronze hands while gazing down at the silhouette of a *kava* bowl. The malleability of the plasticine reflects an identity still forming, still in flux, evolving through time, memory and experience. Positioned alongside the solidity of bronze, leaning towards it, the plasticine draws out a contrast between permanence and impermanence, between the 'groundedness' of heritage and the instability of personal memory. Like the aluminium foil and coconut cans, plasticine is a material with its own agency—not through durability, but through vulnerability. It absorbs dust, fingerprints, marks from the air and touch. Over time, it becomes marbled by its environment, just as identity is shaped by contact with place, culture and history. In this way, the piece carries both the emotional imprint of my younger self and the interpretive distance of the adult I am

now. It is a bridge between two ways of seeing: one immediate and intuitive, the other reflective and uncertain.

But there's something different from the plasticine I used as a child. Back then, my mum would buy me colourful multi-packs, and I'd recycle pieces constantly, adding new colours as I went. But in this work, the plasticine is entirely white. This was the only choice that felt true. It captured how I felt at the moment of making: unfinished, searching, lacking definition. The absence of colour signals the potential for transformative renewal. Tradition isn't necessarily locked into specific materials; it lives in the care, intentions and adaptations we make. In this case, the adaptation is colour itself: a shift from the playful excess of childhood products into something pared back, fragile and unresolved. Here, plasticine's 'schoolroom' stigma becomes a method. Within an art school lens, plasticine is only a transitional material, something temporary, not a finished work but waiting to be cast 'properly' in traditional bronze or something more 'cutting edge,' like fibreglass. By refusing that expectation, I leaned into its supposed incompleteness. Its openness to touch, dust and time became the meaning. Bronze and plasticine, placed side by side, suggest resolution and process respectively, offering an ideological as well as formal contrast. Who decides what counts as 'complete'? Why is permanence valued over vulnerability, polish over touch?

YIELDING

Where plasticine yields, bronze holds. Unlike materials I had been drawn to for their emotional proximity—tin foil, coconut cream cans, fish-and-chip paper—bronze was unfamiliar, distant, even intimidating. Yet I found myself turning to it out of necessity. The everyday materials I once surrounded myself with are fading, becoming harder to find or hold onto. In this sense, bronze became a kind of substitute: not because it carries the same warmth, but because it might endure where the original cannot. It's not what I grew up with, but it's what I have.

The bronze cast of the *kava* bowl is my attempt to memorialise an object that once embodied communal ritual, but now risks becoming a decorative relic. I chose bronze because it has long been used to preserve what matters—statues, memorials, things meant to endure. It can last past my lifetime just as with the bronze cast of my grandad's hands. Traditionally, the *kava* bowl was a vessel for connection, a symbol of presence, sharing and cultural continuity used in ritualistic contexts. However these traditions have been displaced or overshadowed in my upbringing by global symbols of convenience and speed. I paired the bowl with a fish-and-chip paper tapa cloth, a material that speaks more directly to my childhood memories of communal meals and improvised rituals. If materials have agency, then durability and fragility are not grades of value but different ways memory insists on materialising.

TRANSLATION

From behaviour to belonging: once I trusted what materials do, I could admit what they mean in a diasporic culture—how translation, not substitution, keeps ceremony alive.

Following the exploration of plasticine, a material tied to my childhood and shaped by touch, I found myself returning to the familiar again, this time through a very different



Figure 3. Studio studies, works in progress. Photograph: © Zac Whiteside.

material: fish-and-chip paper. This object, so deeply woven into my family life, carries its own quiet significance. It speaks to shared meals, not just with my immediate family but across the wider *aiga* (extended family) on Friday nights, birthdays, Sundays, when food wasn't just food, but love passed around a table. In this work, the paper becomes a substitute for tapa backcloth, not in a way that diminishes tradition, but in a way that *translates* it making space for how diasporic materials can carry similar weight and intention.

Rather than relying solely on substitution, I wanted to bring in the traditional practice of making *lama*, the deep black ink traditionally made by burning candlenuts and carefully collecting the soot. I re-enacted this process myself, drawing on ancestral knowledge as a way to feel grounded, both in nature and in my own body. There's a sensual pleasure in working with *lama*—the scent, the heat, the meditative act of soot collection, all speaking to a slower, embodied form of knowledge.

I hand-painted the fish-and-chip paper with *lama*, blending the disposable with the sacred. The act transforms paper that is often seen as throwaway into a surface of honour and reverence. Central to the work is a turtle, a symbol of *aiga*, which I painted using traditional tapa motifs. Each pattern and mark was chosen with care, carrying individual meanings tied to the rituals of food-sharing gestures of offering, gathering, fullness and gratitude. I'm not claiming that fish-and-chip paper *is* tapa cloth. I'm asserting that meaning and spirituality transcend materials themselves. It's not the material alone that makes something sacred, but the values, care, and intentions we bring to it. The paper is a meaningful adaptation, rather than merely a replacement, bridging ancestral practice with everyday experience, and reflecting how heritage continues to evolve in a new context.





DECOHERENCE (REPRISE)

Ultimately, Nichol's Garden Centre taught me the same lesson. Plants are given order and hierarchy. The tidy border is praised; the stubborn volunteer is condemned. That's judgement at work again; taste masquerading as nature. Because I had become so aware of these judgements—and of my own, shaped by simple anthropocentric ideologies—I wanted to pay closer attention. I began watching not just the world, but my projections onto it: how I could look at a dandelion and see mess, or look at a potted orchid and see refinement, when in reality those values weren't in the plants at all, but in me.

Looking at objects, really looking, projections included, became a way for me to examine the fragile threads between heritage and modern identity, where attempts to preserve tradition are both deeply meaningful and inherently incomplete. Whether in the bush or the fluorescent calm of a garden centre, I was learning to listen for the quiet networks of meaning that pass between people, places and things, even when they don't conform to either dominant ideologies or their academic critique. I was trying to tune in. The lesson carried over into my studio: the way a KFC bucket is dismissed as 'junk' or fish-and-chip paper as 'kitsch' isn't so different from the way a dandelion is condemned as a weed. In both cases, the judgement says more about the framework of value than about the object itself or the relationships within which it gathers meaning.

SANCTUARIES

I know now that my practice might not always be about seeing clearly, but rather about sensing differently, attuning to what is felt, reverberated, carried through my atmospheres of memory and culture. Ideas from various philosophical and cultural traditions support this realisation. British-Jamaican film-maker and music theorist Julian Henriques has proposed the notion of sonic thinking—an epistemology rooted not in vision or static representation, but in sound, vibration and resonance.¹⁴ For Henriques, listening is not passive reception, but a way of knowing that is embodied and deeply relational. African-American theorist Fred Moten's call to "listen otherwise" extends this concept, with an invitation to dwell in the noise, in the excesses and ruptures where conventional knowledge breaks down.¹⁵ And Buddhist teacher Ajahn Brahm's words offer a further layer to this listening: "Where you learn is by getting the lake perfectly still, because only when it is perfectly still does it accurately reflect the stars above." This, Brahm says, is how we learn that real love means loving the whole of life, rather than just the parts you like.¹⁶

Brahm's reflections on love, grief and stillness remind me that to love a thing, person, memory or place without clinging to it, is to honour its transience while recognising its lasting resonance. Like sonic vibrations or shared rituals, love continues long after the source has gone. Brahm's image of the still lake creates the conditions for clarity, not by force but by gentleness. Attempts to preserve tradition are always incomplete, shaped by both care and compromise.

Judgement is never neutral. Looking back, I realise that what I've been working through—gardens, buckets, wrappers, weeds, sanctuaries—is not just a catalogue of objects, but a catalogue of judgements: what counts as refined and what doesn't; what

is celebrated and what is dismissed. To call a bucket 'kitsch,' a weed 'unwanted' or a memory 'sentimental' is to impose a hierarchy that often misses what really matters. For me, these objects are not failures of refinement. They are fragile sanctuaries: places where love, memory and contradiction are carried forward.

As I grew more comfortable working with materials I felt emotionally and culturally drawn to, I began to move away from traditional, institutionally valued mediums and toward those embedded in my everyday life. My materials weren't chosen to represent a narrative, but because they *already held one*.

ARCHIVES

In the end, my work does aim to hold open, rather than resolve, the contradictions between reverence and kitsch, pride and shame, tradition and stereotype. The symbols are dulled: they evoke belonging while simultaneously reflecting the health crises that disproportionately affect Pacific communities. These objects encode the paradox of cultural survival. How do we preserve tradition without perpetuating the very stereotypes and structural inequalities that render our communities vulnerable? By recontextualising these commodities, so often dismissed as disposable or unserious, I try to restore their weight. Within displaced communities, they carry emotional and spiritual significance. They are symbolic vessels of care, memory, and resistance. They preserve the connections between present experience and ancestral practice, even as they speak to rupture and dislocation. Their contradictions are part of their power.

This body of work marks the beginning of what is, for me, a new way of thinking about materiality, about cultural equity and about how objects can function as living archives. I see it as a practice of generational restoration, bringing ancient wisdom into contemporary contexts to address the inequities of displacement. My hope is that these works create space not only for memory, but for co-presence: a shared recognition of complexity, contradiction and care.

THE INVISIBLE (REPRISE)

Finding my voice, both as an artist and in life, has always felt risky. Early on, I absorbed the pressure to sound 'critical,' to dress my work in the right theory so it would be taken seriously. I worried that without it, I'd be dismissed. But over time I've come to see the irony: in rejecting intellectualism, I end up circling back into it, quoting authoritative thinkers even as I question why their authority outweighs lived experience. While these theories are important and add to the discussion, they do not encapsulate my practice or, indeed, any such fluid and contradictory cultural practice. It's funny: I use the intellectual frameworks to prove the worth of things that are commonly enjoyed and popular, but rejected in the intellectual marketplace, *this* marketplace. I make an appeal to the very opinions I'm challenging. Initially, I attempt to create a bridge between both worlds not because I want to, but because I inevitably have to engage with both, and over time I start to value and like what was at first confronting. And if my work is a bridge, at the centre, love is what makes it possible—love for my family, my history, my community, the most radical thing I can possibly offer.

THIS IS MY LANGUAGE
MADE OF DUST AND PLASTICINE
OF GREASE-STAINED PAPER, BURNT SHELLS,
AND FINGERLICKIN' GOOD BUCKETS



Figure 4. Isabella Lepoamo outside POND Gallery, Dunedin, Opening of Ngako exhibition.
Photograph: © Zac Whiteside.

Isabella Lepoamo (b. Invercargill, Aotearoa New Zealand) is a Dunedin-based artist whose practice explores memory, domestic ritual, and the intimacy of everyday materials. Working across sculpture, textiles, painting and installation, she reimagines the remnants of daily life, her works often merge humour with tenderness, balancing nostalgia with social observation. By transforming the ordinary into something devotional, she invites viewers to consider how identity is preserved and passed down through the simplest gestures.

Born in Invercargill, Lepoamo graduated with Distinction from the Dunedin School of Art in 2024, where she was also awarded Top in Sculpture. In 2025 she completed a Certificate in Māori and Indigenous Arts at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, further deepening her understanding of whakapapa and material practice. That same year, she received a Highly Commended Excellence Award at the R T Nelson Small Sculpture Awards for *Kentucky Fried Culture*—a work grown from her own kombucha scoby, playfully merging notions of consumption, care, and cultural identity.

1. See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94–136; Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," in Clement Greenberg: *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 1*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 5–22.
2. David Shulman, dir., *A Day in the Life of Andy Warhol*, BBC Scotland, 2015.
3. "At the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Jeff Koons' Puppy Gets a Colorful New Coat," Guggenheim New York, 21 June 2018, <https://www.guggenheim.org/news/bilbao-jeff-koons-puppy?utm>.
4. "Gagosian to Feature Work by Jeff Koons at Frieze New York 2025," *Gagosian New York*, 29 April 2025, PDF, <https://gagosian.com/media/gallery/press-releases/2025/2025-Gagosian-Frieze-New-York-Koons-Jeff-2025-04-28-1600.pdf>.
5. "Pop Life: Art in a Material World," *Studio International*, 9 December 2009, <https://www.studiointernational.com/pop-life-art-in-a-material-world-tate-modern-london-2009>.
6. Charlston Lin, "The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Behavior" (PhD diss., Manchester Metropolitan University, 2019).
7. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).
8. See Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's take on the Ontological Turn: 'ontology' is just another word for colonialism (Urbane Adventurer: Amiskwaci)," *uma (in)certa antropologia/An (un)certain anthropology* (26 October 2014), <https://umaincertaantropologia.org/2014/10/26/an-indigenous-feminists-take-on-the-ontological-turn-ontology-is-just-another-word-for-colonialism-urbane-adventurer-amiskwaci/>.
9. See Tarunna Sebastian and Angela Giovanangeli, "Reimagining Kinship Systems and Networks: Interconnectedness of Aboriginal Ecologies in Australia (Human and Land Rights)," *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* 24 (October 2024): 64.
10. Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy* (London and New York: Verso, 2002).
11. Edith Amituanai, in Edward Hanfling, "Am I Making Art? The Photographs of Edith Amituanai," *Art New Zealand* 130 (Autumn 2009): 20.
12. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).
13. In Žižek's Hegelian reading, comedy stages the subject's mismatch with itself—the split that becomes visible when the position we took for granted flips back on us. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), especially Chapter 2, "The Comedy of Incarnation."; Žižek, "The Christian-Hegelian Comedy," *Cabinet* 17 (Spring 2005), <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/17/zizek.php>.
14. Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (London: Continuum, 2011).
15. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
16. Ajahn Brahm, Ajahn Brahm: "Why are we here? Why are we born?" 9 January 2015, <https://youtu.be/-RrCjzi74BA?si=yqNQXsJnANU9JnsP>. See also Brahm, *Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung?* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004): 245.