

Photography with/in a Broader Humanity

CHRISTOPHER HOUGHTON

UniSA Creative, University of South Australia, Kaurna/Adelaide

With deep respect and gratitude, the author acknowledges the ancestral forces within Kaurna, Ngarrindjeri and Adnyamathanha lands. You are all beautiful teachers.

Being a white-fella with mixed European heritage, I was born in Brisbane on Yuggera land. My father's ancestry traces back to a Scandi mob that settled in the English midlands (via Normandy) as part of the Viking expansion during the 11th century. My mother was Welsh-Irish, a fourth-generation Australian whose great-grandmother arrived in Sydney Cove in the mid 1800s. The crime for which she was banished remains unknown. When I was five years old, my parents traded their house for a caravan and for many years, we lived an itinerant life as we inched our way through the interior and central Queensland coast. An ex-navy man with a violent past, my father was largely withdrawn and leant on the bottle to stave off his demons. At every opportunity, I left our white tin box and explored the bush. Country became a place of solace and quiet regeneration. Entire days spent in silence observing the rhythms of life around me became common practice. At fifteen I settled back in Brisbane to escape my father's violence and inherited trauma. I have Indigenous cousins from the Iningai people who took me in and became my surrogate family. My closest relation affectionately calls me a vanilla Tim Tam; white on the outside, black on the inside. I am in no position to affirm or deny her claim, but I embrace her kindness as an expression of kinship. Having pursued a creative life across filmmaking and photography for three decades, I have seemingly returned to where I began, and split my time between Ngarrindjeri and Adnyamathanha lands looking for story in Country.

In 2010, I was commissioned to create a portrait of Ngarrindjeri artist, Rita Lindsay Jnr for Country Arts SA. We met at a healing ceremony at the coastal town of Goolwa in Ngarrindjeri Country. The aim of the ceremony was to attend the trauma caused by the building of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge; an action by developers that instigated South Australia's most tragic land rights battle (Bell 1, 249). Becoming familiar with the story of Kumarangk and the bridge became a catalyst for a two-year conversation with Rita, her mother and grandmother. What followed was an invitation to use the medium of photography to explore the metaphysical relationship between Country and its human kin. What began as a single exhibition of works

in 2013 has now prospectively become a life's work. To date this has spanned three exhibitions, an Honours project and a PhD, all of which aim to articulate a practice of relational photography over one that objectifies its subjects.

Acknowledging the ontological divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge production, my aim is to talk about the notion of relational photography through the idea of kin-making. As a practice, I refer to a multi-species view of kinship advocated by Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour in which relational processes are embraced as acts of worlding (Haraway, *Staying* 49; Latour 35). But I am also talking about kin-making exemplified through Aboriginal classical thought (Black 43),¹ specifically Ngarinyin law man David Mowaljarlai's urging to engage with Aboriginal pattern thinking; an ontological mode of thinking and being that runs contrary to Western colonial practices. As an Australian artist who embraces nature in its multiplicity (Descola 271), this is something I am drawn to act on, especially living in a country with multiple ontological readings of the world, in and of which we live.

To tease this out, I want to align a range of practices to arrive at a renewed understanding of how photography can work, divorced from the binaries that have framed the discourse since its invention. This is a toe-dipper of a discussion; an introduction to a practice-based research project I have enacted over the last decade that troubles landscape photography, and one that seeks to establish common ground between Australian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal notions of Country. As much as it can be, it is a reconciliatory act motivated by the desire to decolonise my own thinking. By decolonisation, I mean the disinvestment in colonial hierarchies, binary thinking and practices of anthropocentrism.

In the last century, author and critic Susan Sontag declared no photograph could get away from the original object it represents; that the image is eternally attached to its referent (17). I struggled with Sontag's view then, and I vehemently disagree with it now. As with Roland Barthes's articulation of photographs as static objects (57), my discomfort has been the boundaries such discussions invite, and how they embed within everyday colonial culture to such a degree we rarely question them. In turn, they become a semiotic reality that limits ongoing practice. In 2012, curator and theorist Ariella Azoulay observed that photographic discourse has, since its inception, been driven by its technology (*Civil Imagination* 11) despite the ambition of one the medium's forefathers. It was in 1877 that Henry Fox Talbot proposed photography offered the opportunity for nature and art to collaborate in a unified act of expression (1). Talbot's omission to centralise human endeavour fuelled such a backlash, the discourse became fixed to the anthropocentric pendulum of photographer, technology, and the mediation between the two.

Almost 200 years on, examining the vernacular often used to describe photography, it is easy to assume the practice is driven by acts of possession, opposition, even violence. Casually speaking, it is common to hear phrases such as ‘this picture was shot’, that things are ‘captured’, moments are ‘frozen’ or ‘stolen’ and so on. As an artist who opts for a subtler practice, I find language like this disturbing. Not to be naïve about how photography has been used in service to colonial imperatives, it is however, of itself, not a violent medium. Despite almost two centuries of discourse supporting the idea, I would argue photography is not a possessive medium, nor even a reflective one. Photographs can represent, absolutely, but only as much as humans endow them with the capability. Photographs don’t do the representing. Humans do.

From the perspective of kinship, Donna Haraway’s urging to be account-able for “worlds that world worlds” is to accept response-ability for one’s thinking, actions, effects and their performative entanglement with/in material exchange (“Anthropocene”). It is a treatise for equity that rejects limitation within any practice that enflames prejudice or ignorance about human impact and intra-species connectivity, regardless of race, gender and belief system. It also prompts an ongoing interrogation of the boundaries we engage with/in to prescribe our experience. To examine how photographic practice engages with/in the world is not immune to such interrogation. Contemporising the limitations of photographic discourse, Azoulay expands the discussion to include the multiplicity of effects photographs have through the apparatus of interpretation, context, time and people (*The Civil Contract*). In some cases, a photograph doesn’t even need to be in the room to cause an effect in the world. Azoulay’s analysis demonstrates the worldly relationship between thoughts, words, actions and their effects, a material-semiotic dance involving a wide range of actors. Like many fields in 21st century discourse, viewing photography as a materially discursive act, the practice becomes much more about the relationship between a multitude of human and non-human actors and the material construct of our thinking and being.

As a theorist, Azoulay limits her observation to the after-effects of photographs and of photography as a culturally embedded series of encounters. As a practitioner, my contention is the act of creating a photograph is also a series of encounters in which a multiplicity of actors, intra-dependent of the photographer, collaborate with/in the practice. Reviewing the physics of the process, contrary to the possessive language mentioned earlier, I would (and do) argue that the act of creating a photograph is actually made possible by the removal of an obstacle. It is the retraction of an aperture that enables photography, giving way to an exchange between two receptive agents; a given number of light particles and a light sensitive emulsion. As a discreet act, photography is about relationship. Thinking-with photography in relational rather than binary ways, through feminist discourse rather than colonial, through a diffrac-

tive lens rather than a mirror, enables practical considerations for a much broader frame of reference. Returning to the healing ceremony I witnessed at Goolwa, as an artist, I was keen to address the experience. As a white-fella without any connection to Ngarrindjeri culture, I had no idea how to go about it, nor whether I should even attempt to do so. Motivated by the conversations I had with Rita, her mother and grandmother, the respectful choice became to suspend the trauma and its colonial politics, and instead, attend to the materiality of Country. That is, I was invited to walk the land and participate in the experience of Country, and to explore the creation of photographs as a reconciliatory act through the *work* of art (Bolt 22).

As I discovered, the trouble with the photography of Country is that no such genre exists. What consumes even the notion of it, is a vernacular and professional industry of Australian landscape photography born of colonial imperatives. This is not to suggest Indigenous artist haven't challenged its concerns. Nici Cumpston and Michael Riley have both used and subverted its conventions. Broadly however, tourism remains landscape photography's principal motivator, either through the collection and sharing of personal memories, or to sell exotic and tameable notions of the continent. Accepting the limitations of landscape's etymology, thus its agency and *e/affect*, as many have observed, the genre is fuelled by an aesthetics of distance, of commodity caught in a binary loop that reinforces objectification and ownership (Giblet and Tolonen 95; Batchen 260). Accepting the aesthetics of their construction and marketability, as writer Rebecca Solnit asserts, it is a kind of pornography. From an Aboriginal Australian perspective, the genre complicates and often derails the ability to experience Country as anything other than a colonial enterprise.

For anthropologist Phillipe Descola, a central obstacle for non-Aboriginal Australians embracing the Aboriginal experience of Country is the issue of perspectivism, further complicated by the Western practices of human exceptionalism (Descola 271; Ankler 203). While Western belief systems are built on the idea of “one nature and a multitude cultures,” many Indigenous peoples across the planet suppose the reverse, that is, “one culture” and “multiple natures” where bodies (across species) act as sites of difference in perceiving their surroundings. From this perspective, it is bodies that create difference, in the sense that bodies literally change how we see and experience the world (Viveiros de Castro 469).² The way a dog, or an ibis, or a tree-fern sees the world, is different because of their biological design, their specificity of language/cognition and their use of signs. Across the sciences, that multiple non-human beings perceive and interpret the world around them is no longer a question. Even the boundaries between biology and geology are blurring though the discovery of active microbial ecosystems within rock that operate at timescales humans can barely comprehend. To respect the implication—something Aboriginal knowledge production has been doing for millennia—requires extending the idea of

personhood beyond the human. Where be-ing human is seen as a condition rather than a species; as an organic ground state for a conventional, or perhaps even universal, mode of perceiving enacted by multiple bodies and beings of all persuasions.³ From a multiple ontological viewpoint, extending the notion of personhood within an Australian context does not imply the need to be Indigenous (Wagner 274). What it does require however, is the resolute acceptance that multiple species or beings live in a relational and equal capacity and that practices of anthropocentrism, born of colonial and enlightened mindsets are logically, factually and experientially unthinkable (Haraway, *Staying* 49).

To instantiate kin-making from a Ngarinyin perspective, I want to travel back a generation to Kalumburu in Western Australia. It is 1986. Photographer Jutta Malnic and Ngarinyin Law Man and Elder, Banggal David Mowaljarlai are camped by the King Edward River. Malnic wakes at dawn to see Mowaljarlai brewing tea over an open fire. She is keen to get moving, to photograph some rock-art. Instead, Mowaljarlai urges her to be still.

You know Jutta... When daylight starts, it wakes me up. I can't sleep anymore. It wakes the whole body... Morning gives you the flow of a new day—ahh! With this beautiful colour inside, the sun is coming up, with that glow that comes straight away in the morning. This colour comes toward me and the day is waiting. You have a feeling in your heart that you're going to feed your body this day, get more knowledge. You go out now, see animals moving, see trees, a river. You are looking at nature and giving it your full attention, seeing all its beauty. Your vision has opened and you start learning now. When you touch them, all things talk to you, give you their story. It makes you really surprised. You feel you want to get deeper, so you start moving around and stamp your feet—to come closer, and to recognise what you are seeing. You understand that your mind has been opened to all those things because you are seeing them; because your presence and their presence meet together and you recognise each other. These things recognise you. They give their wisdom and their understanding to you when you come close to them... When you recognise it, it gives you strength—a new flow. You have life flow. You are going off now, to see what the day will hold. You feel a different person. One more day is added to your life... You got country as far as the eye can see, and it's yours. But because of this consciousness, you are going through it reverently, quietly—through the middle of all this nature. (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 53)

Drawn from a life lived-with/of Country, Mowaljarlai's experiential perspective on the birth of a new day acknowledges the agency of intra-active relationships. It is, as Karen Barad demonstrates through agential realism, that humans are not outside observers of the world, but part of nature that "is" the world (*Meeting* 29). For Mowaljarlai, that the day waits, and is waiting, is a working acknowledgement of relations and exchange. His urging to re-cognise what we are seeing, and to recognise each other is also resonates with Charles Sanders Peirce's logic of merging selves through processes of material semiosis (Holm 252). Like Peirce, who advocates self-surrender as key to experiencing the other, Mowaljarlai elicits reverence without hierarchy that traditionally situates the other (nature) as an external object. Rather, nature (inclusive of the human) is constantly merging and emergent within an intra-active exchange. By acknowledging the being-of, and being-with the other, practices of representationalism are de-colonised through an understanding that there is no 'other', only relationship. By acknowledging the intra-activity with/in nature, the focus shifts from concerns of mirroring and sameness, of conquest and commodification, to practices that are performative, and in their doing-ness, produce new forms of relations and exchange.

INDIGENOUS JURISPRUDENCE

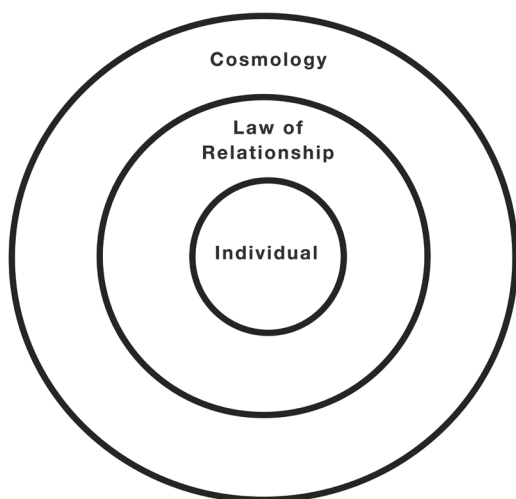


Fig. 1 Triadic structure of Indigenous jurisprudence as described by Christine Black in her book, *The Land is the Source of the Law: a dialogical encounter with Indigenous jurisprudence* (8). Drawn diagram by the author based on Black's model of relationality.

Accepting that Indigenous knowledge production can be complex to embrace, in her book *The Land is the Source of the Law: a dialogical encounter with Indigenous jurisprudence*, Kombumerri and Munaljahlai author Christine Black offers a triadic structure to elucidate its resonance concerning relationality. Black's model describes three concentric circles; the inner representing the Individual, the middle representing the Law of Relationship (what one is accountable to and for), the outer representing Cosmology (the universe); Figure 1 (Black 8).

The triadic arrangement reinforces the fact that nothing is mutually exclusive. Additionally, and central to Indigenous classical thought, the Law of Relationship is patterned into the land and predates the arrival of human beings. Thus, human knowledge is gained through living

with/in the systems of nature. This is what Mowaljarlai articulates through his experience of a new day. To enable those of non-Aboriginal lineage to think-with Country and re-cognise kinship with non-human relations, Mowaljarlai advocated for the public sharing of Aboriginal pattern thinking. Although Mowaljarlai passed away in 1997 before he got the chance, Palyku writer, Ambelin Kwaymullina offers the following:

Imagine a pattern. This pattern is stable, but not fixed. Think of it in as many dimensions as you like—but it has more than three. This pattern has many threads of many colours, and every thread is connected to, and has a relationship with, all of the others. The individual threads are every shape of life. Some—like human, kangaroo, paperbark [tree]—are known to western science as ‘alive’; others like rock, would be called ‘non-living’. But rock is there, just the same. Human is there too, though it is neither the most or the least important thread—it is one among many; equal with the others. The pattern made by the whole is in each thread, and all the threads together make the whole. Stand close to the pattern and you can focus on a single thread; stand a little further back and you can see how that thread connects to others; stand further back still and you can see it all—and it is only once you see it all that you can recognise the pattern of the whole in every individual thread. The whole is more than its parts, and the whole is in all its parts. This is the pattern that the ancestors made. It is life, creation spirit, and it exists in country. (Kwaymullina 11)

Within colonial Western thinking, it requires a paradigmatic shift to accept that humans are patterned into a Law borne of Country rather than the reverse, and as such, are no more nor less important than the whole; an equal, integrated and conscious aspect of life. As Mowaljarlai urges, to gain knowledge, it is important to walk the land, look closely and spend time to hear its story so that understanding can follow. As Paul Carter observes of the materiality of regions, it is “a flow in two directions,” or as Karen Barad might suggest from an agential realist perspective, the be-ing of, and becoming-with Country that strengthens the flow (and thus knowledge) of material relationships (Carter 20; Barad, “No Small Matter” G110). To do so enables a multiple ontological experience that cultivates felt knowledge and extends beyond the rigorous intellectualism anchored to a discreet (colonial) belief system (Black 8). Resembling Barad’s agential realism and Peirce’s semiotics, Indigenous pattern thinking advocates for the practical and essential notion that matter is performative.

To resituate photography as a relational practice challenges its historic investment in anthropocentric and binary frameworks. It also challenges how we think about representation. It also motivates an approach to language and practices that create futures realised through the acceptance of a unified *ecology of selves* in which consciousness is enacted through acts of semiosis, of and beyond the human (Kohn 71; Petrelli 5). Again, using a triadic structure to embed an ontology of photographic practice that embraces relationality, the enacted *work* of art in a relational context becomes self-evident; (Figure 2).

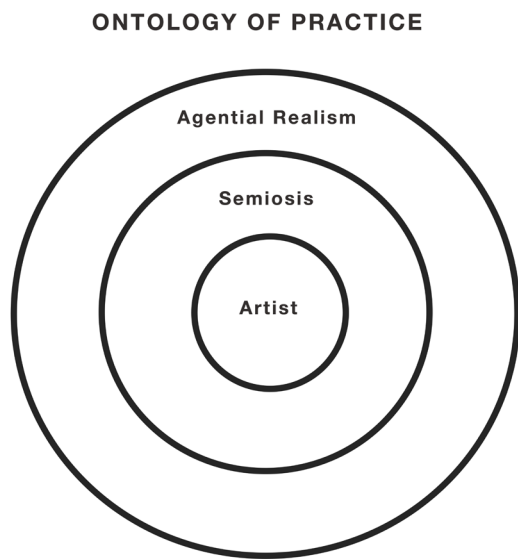


Fig. 2 An ontology of (relational) photographic practice. Diagram by Christopher Houghton.

In conversation with Black's articulation of Indigenous jurisprudence, the 'Artist' is the Individual (Figure 2). 'Semiosis' is the medium of exchange that expresses the Law of Relationship. 'Agential Realism' (after Barad), as a subatomic theory of the universe through which the innate patterning of life is expressed, is the Cosmological. The implication for the material practice of photography is that concerns of agency invite more than a singular reliance on the mediation between the artist and their tools. Expanding the boundaries of practice to include other sensory stimuli as collaborative agents is to re-cognise the material intra-activity within practice

and thus, the range of semiotics that author a photograph. It gives agency to what Black articulates as *felt* knowledge (Black 27) and acknowledges a broader range of non-human actors within the exchange and thus, a broader ontological practice.

How this plays out in the field, in making photographs, is practice dependent. To foster cognitive engagement with the materiality of Country, I engage a self-prescribed practice of slow photography using a combination of analogue and digital processes that include a large format camera, film stock, photo-electric and observed light metering, hand-processing and zone analysis of tonal value (Adams 1). Practices of seeing, traditionally associated with 'capturing' landscape photographs are supplanted with a re-visioned practice that foregrounds Talbot's original reading of

the medium, that is, as a notation in light in which the agency of nature is accepted as a collaborative principal of the practice. To offer an in-practice example, I offer the following extract, taken from work journals that articulate an exchange with/in Ngarrindjeri Country in Deep Creek National Park between 2012-2016.

Each visit to Blowhole Beach begins with 30-minute drive from Carrickalinga, a twenty-minute meditation, then a one-hour walk down a roughly hewn bush track to reach the coast—all in the dark. Over time, it has become a ritual to focus my attention in the present. Experience has proven that as a sustained activity, the practice enlivens my nervous system to spontaneous events, some of which fall outside my immediate field of vision. Success is relative. At times, I've been scared shitless by an owl erupting in the dark from a low tree branch, while at others, I've managed to avoid stepping on multiple, venomous brown snakes by trusting a sudden instinct on where to place my feet. As I descend this narrow, rocky path, a group of kangaroos become my final obstacle to reaching the ocean. As their grey silhouettes assemble across the track, they remind me I am on foreign soil, and should they choose, the bigger ones could dispense me off the cliff with a swift kick. I take a wide berth around them, watching from the corner of my vision as they turn their heads like clockwork dolls as I navigate the scrub with a heavy backpack. I must look very odd to them, like a half-bent, oversized beetle. The respect this headland invites is reinforced by a litany of narrow ascents and deep declines across loose shale and stone. One misstep (or the kick of a kangaroo), and the fall would reduce me to a tangle of meat and bone in the shallows. Despite the jeopardy or perhaps because of it, the process engenders a feeling of integration. The result is a gradual sense of envelopment that is both clarifying and comforting.

The function of entering the environment in darkness is twofold. In three years of becoming familiar with this place, I have never encountered another human as I enact this ritual of descent, so I am able to practice active silence for two hours before reaching the coast. Secondly, from the perspective of image making, the combination of tide, sea spray and early morning moisture blackens the rock. Without any shadows caused by direct sunlight, the rock reveals undulations in its surface that render a complex tangle of forms. As the sky lightens, the humidity arrives and begins to slowly air-dry the surface. It is not just the humidity of this morning that is present, but the residue of previous mornings, as well as the lilt and direction of the wind, the height of the tide and the swell of currents, all of which conflate to vary how the rock presents. It makes witnessing the same photograph from previous visits a near impossible task. Using film extrapolates the task as I will only know for certain if a negative is successful once it is processed in a darkroom a hundred kilometres away. The practice of using a wooden field camera not only slows the act of making a photograph, it reinforces the material processes that render the work. If I make an error of

exposure (as I have), if there is a light leak (as has happened) or the chemistry is not right, the image is gone and I am forced to release the memory of it. Experientially, I have found trying to recapture images stuck in mind but lost to process, an exercise in futility as the materiality of this environment is never the same due to the complexity of the systems at work. Chasing the thought of a picture becomes a distraction from being present and limits the ability to be presently responsive. Because my attention is elsewhere, I can become unaware of synchronous exchanges as they unfold.

As dawn approaches I reach the Southern Ocean. The sky is just light enough to switch off the torch. I traverse the rock near the water's edge, walking gently in oblong circles near where a previous photograph was made; (Figure 3). The image has since disassembled itself, and to even come close, I must find the exact angle, at the precise distance, in near identical light to see it. I make the attempt as a way to secure my mind for the potential of creating new work. But I catch myself in the past, hear the thought-processes and stop. I look at the ocean, read the water and get back to being responsive.

I become aware of the immensity of the rhythms to realise the intricacies of the patterns in this environment are vast and immense, and prospectively too complex to discern without spending decades here. It feels like I am just flirting, hoping the essence of this place will make an impact, etch into my cells and guide me in a particular direction. Mostly, it is an unconscious an intuitive process, hence the surprise when something presents itself. Until then, it's a waiting game, for an act of convergence between objects, of which I am one. Sitting in silence, walking, not walking, observing, not observing, has become the status quo between the clicking of the shutter. I balance on the edges, tightrope-walking on sharp, weathered stone. I am playing, occasionally glancing at the rock, trying not to think. Due to changes in the air, some of the black rock has turned dark grey. Some of the dark grey is now a mid-tone. My attention is drawn to the water as a seal breaks the surface and I am aware my eyes land on the spot just before the seal did. It floats on its back exposing its belly to the morning light. For several minutes, it seems to enjoy just being there. I continue to walk, watch, take another few steps, look down to assess where to place my foot, then stop. I see a small crevice with a distinct form appearing on one edge. The humidity has lightened the surface of the rock in irregular ways and stories are appearing. It can take hours or minutes depending of the density of stone, its proximity to the water, the intensity of the wind. Experientially, I am walking across what feels like, an immense breathing canvas. Looking down at the crevice in the rock, one side is bright white, and I can discern a cloud, the bottom edge of which is defined only because the rock falls away. As I teeter back and forth, the edge of the crevice disappears but the



Fig. 3 Christopher Houghton, *Storm*, (2015), Silver gelatin negative, ink on paper, 160cm x 110cm. Image © Christopher Houghton

edge of cloud remains because of its lightness. Across the gap are three quartz veins, like lightning bolts or rain falling from the cloud above it. As I sway back and forth like a praying mantis, the composition disappears and reappears, and the cloud with it. I untie the tripod, unpack the camera, choose a lens, double darks, light meter and attach the cable release. It is a flat angle looking straight down across two rock beds. Because of the height, I have to create a platform from other rocks that just enable me to peer around the edges of the ground glass. I make two exposures, note the details and keep walking. I process the negatives in my bathroom two days later. Washed and dry, I scan the best exposure and make global adjustments to bring the image into the range of what I saw on the day. Knowing I have the base image, I stop working and walk away to shed my focus on technicals.

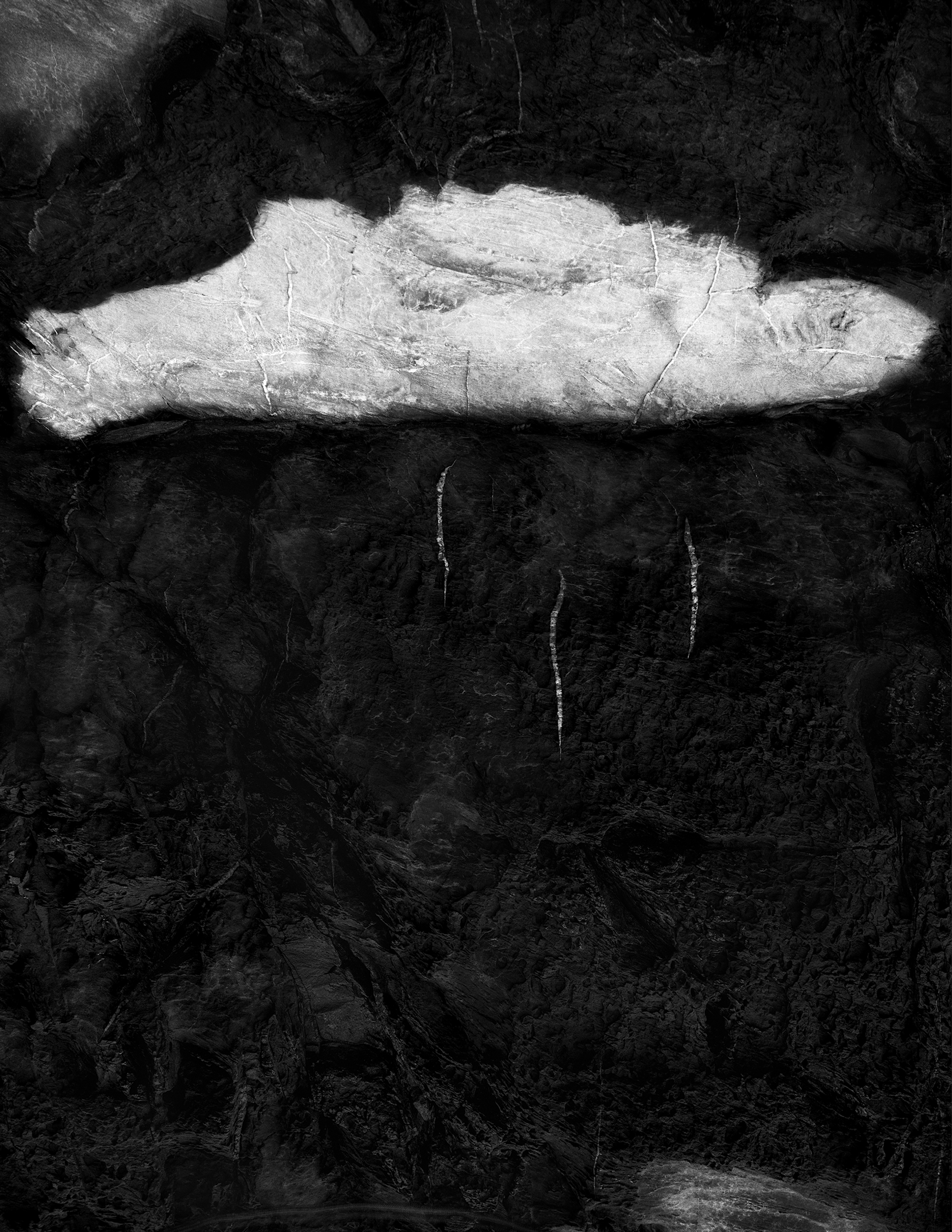


Fig. 4 (Previous page) Christopher Houghton, *A brief history of Deep Creek*, Ngarindjeri Country, (2015), silver gelatin negative, ink on paper, 110cm x 165cm. Image © Christopher Houghton

After a day or so, I return to the negative regularly, spending time, adjusting the balance of exposure and contrast as I would printing through an enlarger. The shadow area is tricky as any adjustment changes the interpretation completely. The rock needs to be rock, but it also reads as a night or pre-dawn sky, and a primordial view of the earth in formation. I have cropped the image as per my original imaginings but I feel drawn to explore the fullness of the negative. So I wipe all I've done and start over. There is enough area across the negative to see the cloud in full. Its edges present as chaotic and muddy, yet, after balancing the weight of shadows and highlights, I begin to perceive faces at either end of the cloud (Figure 4). To see the faces are a revelation; a story within the rock that speak to the intentions of the practice, which is to discover stories of formation and presence, geophysiological hieroglyphs of evolution expressing the world as it manifests itself; as if Gaia is chronicling her own story, and I am witnessing her handwriting.

Three years on, I finally resolved a photograph found in the same region that, at first, was near impossible to distinguish; (Figure 5). Because of its span, I made four negatives, and as per the last example, it is, on one hand, a photograph of a rock face. Largely submerged by water depending on the tide, it took time, patience and surrender to understand what I could perceive of the story that was presenting itself.

In practice, this meant multiple viewings of the subject in varying conditions, before and after the negative was exposed, just to read what was there—to hear and feel its story. Most who view the work don't see a photograph. Rather, they see a story of embodiment.

Due to the immensity of systems at play, to become familiar with a region's unique character, it is fair to accept one will never know its language in full, and that its stories are constantly evolving. This is the in-practice framework Mowaljarlai discusses; to walk Country and learn its knowledge. It is also resonant with the constancy of movement in the mattering of relationship; of selves in merging and emergent states (Peirce 170). To walk through a dry creek bed or coastline with this perspective in mind, is not only to see a row of trees lining the banks, a kangaroo leaping up the bank, carcasses of the dead or sunbaked rocks, but rather, a constant flow and exchange of energy between bodies, of bodies, through bodies, bound by the unifying materiality of Country. In expanding the boundaries of seeing that traditionally function as an assistant to memory, mnemonic residue may linger (I know what a rock looks like, therefore I see a rock in this picture) but because objects are experienced

and expressed as more than their literal counterpoint, the experience and subsequent reading invites a multitude of other viewpoints coalesced through a multitude of non-human bodies. Through a practice of slow photography, it is not the capture of a specific negative that matters, but a congealing of felt language that arrives through the familiarity (comfort) of place and the materiality of production.⁴ In the field, the question becomes not what do I wish to photograph, but how do I relate? What do I re-cognise, and through what exchange am I re-cognised? Extending the engagement alters the context, thus the nature and conversation of the presented works.

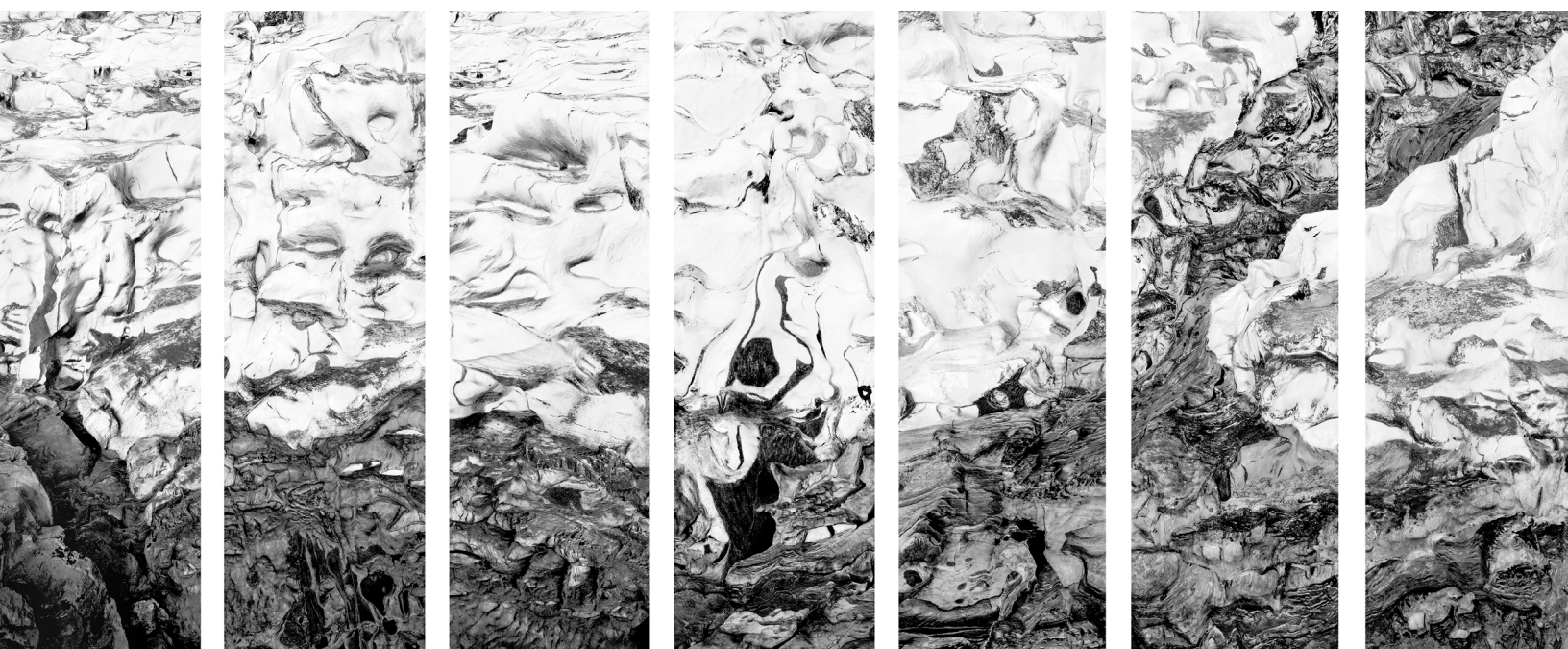


Fig. 5 Christopher Houghton, *I am not alone here*, (2021), Four silver gelatin negatives, ink on paper across seven panels. 480cm x 175cm. Image © Christopher Houghton

Returning to Peirce’s semiotics; between the rock, myself, Ngarrindjeri Country and all it contains, there are selves of past and present, of geology, formation and effect, of and between bodies, across time and space. From the perspective of Country as “a multidimensional and storied place” (Haraway, *Staying* 26), what I am seeing and responding to is an accumulation of presence. It is as Mowaljarlai suggests; to see Country and know that country sees you. It is through getting close, walking with reverence (not awe), that one can access its knowledge. Having experienced the photography of Country this way for numerous years now, I would argue it is possible to express patterns of mattering that begin in the sub-atomic that realise objects in the world that we can sense, see and touch. And in ways that respect the complex diversity of Country, or, as Descola might observe, humanity in its full expression.

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NOTES

1 Acknowledging that language evolves and that institutional approaches vary, I use the phrase ‘classical Aboriginal thought’ with respect for Kombumerri and Munaljahlai author, Christine Black’s use of the same terminology in her publication *The Land is the Source of the Law: A Dialogical Encounter with Indigenous Jurisprudence*. Also to acknowledge Professor Aileen Moreton Robinson’s deference to Indigenous philosophy.

2 Descola’s inquiry into modes of being is concerned with examining how beings of a certain kinds of humans operate in their environment and to which he ascribes four ontological ‘styles of worlding’. He makes the point that naturalism, the mode most aligned with colonial Western thought, is best understood as a localised variant rather than a universal reality. He also draws attention to the fact that such distinctions are heuristic. While one mode will run in the foreground, people are capable of, and often do, incorporate more than one into their perceptivity. Thus, there is nothing stopping the blurring of experiential boundaries between ontologies because it readily happens.

3 For Peirce, semiosis and thought production are not exclusive to human beings. Anthropologist Lars Kjaerholm cites Peirce to argue for the notion of individuality while also coming into oneself through processes of semiosis beyond the self. It is a universal state of being beyond indigeneity and belief systems.

4 ‘Seeing’ in this context involves more than the sensory experience of sight. Patterning as articulated by David Mowaljarlai can be seen, heard and felt. Implicit within the practice of photography is the acceptance that none are mutually exclusive. The critical difference is in acknowledging through what mechanism and intention such knowledge arrives and is acted upon. In Bill Neidjie’s words (a contemporary of Mowaljarlai), lawful behavior is not something outside the self, but emanates from people in their most corporeal form (foot, head, finger, nail, blood). Thus, paying deep attention to feeling brings a person into relationship with the internal law (balance) and the feeling for other life forms within a practice of reciprocity.