

## Tender Places: The Claypans Diaries, Part 1 and 2

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*Tender Places* in a creative research project engaging the settler body in reflexive dialogue with theory in and through place, to explore moral responsibilities of settler descended peoples in the time of ecological breakdown. The entanglement of severance and extraction with ecological and social violence poses a provocation to settler descended peoples: trouble the trans-generational privileges conferred by colonialism, and seek modes and methodologies of reparation and (re)connection that restore life giving relationships between peoples, species and places. Working with the Ilparpa Claypans, a site of personal significance on the outskirts of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, my creative research uses Deborah Bird Rose's provocation of "Taking Notice", sensual language and presencing the co-existence of love and violence in order to mobilise the body in the act of physical translation of ideas with/in place through walking, writing and digital photography. The research acknowledges and activates trans-local relationships through the creation and sending of postcards that document, translate and disseminate field notes to and through an international network of artist peers. The postcard is presented as a queering material medium; an appropriated artefact of outsider privilege, a public/private artwork for an audience of one, and a material item that crosses political and geographical borders to link places and people through space and time. My paper locates this practice of (trans)local place-based inquiry into ecological crisis within broader decolonising, feminist and creative inquiries into the Anthropocene. Postcards and other creative research artefacts will be shared to demonstrate the methodology in action, and I reflect on the decolonising potential of reflexive and embodied engagement with place in relation to settler identity.

I honour the Country and the ancestors of the Arrernte people, on whose lands I undertake this work, and the Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, on whose lands I first shared these ideas.



## Introduction

This paper tells the story of two iterations of creative, place based research at the Ilparpa Claypans, a series of twelve ephemeral claypans southwest of the township of Alice Springs. This personal and reflexive writing captures two iterations of the development of a reading, walking and making practice that occurred within the broader research framework of a PhD. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on these two iterations of place practice to expose how the process developed as a series of movements and encounters with three key theorists: Deborah Bird Rose, Val Plumwood and Margaret Kemarre Turner. The story of the research is told through linear time, weaving the theory and practice together in a way to illuminate my process of learning.

The first part of this paper is a version of a presentation I made as part of the panel, “Encounters with and within the Anthropocene: Speculating on Particular-Planetary Aesthetics” at the *Ngā Tūtaki – Encounter/s: Agency, Embodiment, Exchange, Ecologies* conference in Auckland in December 2019. I was in the early stages of doctoral research. By that time, I had stumbled into walking practice at the Ilparpa Claypans, and was travelling in the good company of the writings of Deborah Bird Rose. The *Ngā Tūtaki* presentation, *Postcards from the Claypans*, shared how and why I came to be walking ‘with’ Rose and Turner, and the postcards I had been sending to document and share this practice. The second part of this paper details the development of *Shadow Work*, a cyanotype map of the claypans, in January 2020. This process of situating myself at the claypans through the creation of the Shadow Work map is contextualised within Val Plumwood’s philosophical work on the “Shadow Places” of dwelling.

### Part 1. Walking at the Claypans

My research investigates the moral responsibilities of settler people in the time of ecological and social breakdown, through participatory, place-based, creative, and pedagogical practice. I came to this investigation in 2018, with the feeling of the world being on fire and not knowing what to do about it. I knew that, as a fair-skinned settler person, I had a fair amount of responsibility for the unfolding crisis but I didn’t know how to translate that into “response-ability” (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 37-38). I had some inkling that my creative practice and unsettling questions about my relationship to place held clues as to how to respond. Mostly I felt that what I’d done in the past wasn’t working, and I was searching for something new.

Walking is a troubling medium. It makes the mixed up and generative trouble that Haraway asks us to stay with, “learning to be truly present...as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (*Staying* 1). To “walk a concept” is to generate a “speculative middle” that “complicates, unsettles and disturbs thought” (Truman and Springgay, *Walking Methodologies* 134). I began to walk as a way of reflecting on and making sense of what I was learning through my activism and desktop research. I became interested in pedagogical and creative practices that could expose and disrupt the settler gaze, and the potential new ways of seeing and being that might emerge from this disruption. Influenced by Sarah Truman and Stephanie Springgay’s *Provocations for Walking Research*, I began to engage with literature as an agent of defamiliarisation (261). In this paper, I present the process and outcomes of my walks at the Ilparpa Claypans, a series of twelve ephemeral claypans, 13 kilometres southeast of Alice Springs.

Walking places the body at the intersection of thoughts and place, offering a way of “knowing the world through the body, and the body through the world” (Solnit 47). Placing the body in contact with the world, can be a method of refusing the fragmentation of Western knowledge-making that is rooted in modernity and “approach[es] an inert world in order to dissect, rearrange, classify, typologise and remake” (Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country* 180). Given the centrality of land to settler colonial project (Tuck and Yang 5) place is a vital frame for the development of “restorative practices that connect people up in respectful ways and look[s] after country at the same time” (Kessar 12). I first began thinking about walking as method of engaging in restorative place learning through Rose’s writing on how her Aboriginal teacher and friend, Jessie Wirripa “lived in an ethic of inter-subjective attention where life happens because living things take notice” (“Taking Notice” 100). This thinking was further developed by Margaret Somerville’s writing on how engaging the settler body in sensual learning with/in place can “identify absences and construct new stories of place” through the development of material intimacy and dialogical relationality with other people, species, and time (338).

My early experiments with walking took place at a variety of different locations around the township of Alice Springs. These walks were akin to a stone skimming across the surface—touching multiple sites but lacking in depth. They were reflective of the “multi-centered” relationship to place articulated by Lucy Lippard, but failed to interrogate or interrupt it (5). This practice was akin to Freya Mathew’s articulation of a modernist viewing the world as “an ever-changing artefact of his passing whims” (4). Subsequently, I abandoned this process in search of an alternative framework of engagement.

Somerville's writing on "emergent arts-based methodologies" provided an instructive way forward for my inquiry (340). Writing on the epistemic relationship between maker and medium, Somerville locates creative renderings of place at the intersection of medium, body, and place. By engaging in a series of returns to place, artists can generate a body of iterative works. Individual renderings are iterative and located within a multiplicity of renderings and reflections, which can be re/arranged to create an assemblage of place, layered with relational meaning-making.

I selected the Ilparpa Claypans, a series of ephemeral claypans southwest of the township of Alice Springs, as the site for a series of walking experiments. Over several months, I experimented with theory as an agent of defamiliarisation, that could provoke me to "rethink and re/move what has become habitual, and to re-evaluate or upset common opinion" (Truman and Springgay, "Propositions" 261). My defamiliarising provocations were drawn from Deborah Bird Rose, a foundational theorist in my research, read alongside Margaret Kemarre Turner's *Iwenhe Tjerrtye*, which gave voice to the worldview of Arrernte people, whose land I walked on. Each experiment began with reading a short excerpt from one or more texts, selected based on intertextual relationality and/or personal resonance. As I walked, I placed my body in a discursive relationship with text and place, paying acute attention to my physical, emotional and intellectual experiences and reactions throughout the walk. I documented the findings of these walking investigations through photos, text, and voice recordings on my phone, noting the impact of the readings on my view of place, and vice versa.

Recognising that "situated knowledges are about communities, not isolated individuals" (Haraway, "Situated" 590), I began to send postcards created through the walking practice as a way of documenting my walking experiments, and sharing what I was learning with peers. I was drawn to postcards as an intimate and relational creative practice. Postcards blur public and private correspondence (Motter 43) and move across political and geographical borders, linking places through space and time. In walking with theory, I was enacting a dialogue between the situated knowledges of the texts, my body, and the claypans. Through the creation of postcards, I extended these dialogues outwards, to connect with peers who were thinking with and in their own local contexts.

Each postcard was a translation of an individual walk at the claypans. At the end of each walk, before leaving, I'd find a place to sit and write the postcard text. I would weave field notes together to provide a summary of what I had experienced and learned during that particular iteration of the practice. The text was accompanied by a print of a digital photo from the walk, offering the reader visual context of the

place at that specific time and day. Three of the postcards created and sent during this time are shared with reflective notes, as translations of the first iteration of the place-based practice at the Ilparpa claypans.

**Fig. 1** Postcard image, Ilparpa Claypans, Arrernte land, 21st May 2019. Sent to Paula Faraco, Berlin, Germany. Photo © Kelly Lee Hickey



### Postcards from the Claypans

*I drive out to the claypans two days after the rains to catch them before they go down. When I first moved to town, a rain like this would fill them for months. Now, with so much driving over, the clay is worn thin and they drain within days. I want to blame other people for this, but like Deborah Bird Rose says, we are all hero, victim and villain. Although in this case, I'm not sure what being a hero for this place would look like. The flies have returned after a summer of heatwaves and drought. The late rains return humidity and heat where we thought we had made the switch to winter doonas and freezing nights. Everything is unpredictable, just like the election result, and just like what has happened here I want to blame it on someone else. I wish I could leave you with something graceful, like blame doesn't change what has happened, and then a 4WD splashes past me, and my clarity turns to rage.*



**Fig. 2 (Previous page)** Postcard image, Ilparpa Claypans, Arrernte land, 4th June 2019.  
Sent to Shannyn Palmer, Bywong, New South Wales, Australia. Photo © Kelly Lee Hickey

I chose to walk at the Ilparpa Claypans site for sentimental reasons. In the decade that I have lived in Central Australia, the deterioration of the claypans has compounded and escalated. Buffel grass chokes Coolibah trees, dumping increases with council tip fees, and 4WDs plough into the claypans, leaving deep scars in their wake. I began to walk with the hope that a defamiliarising practice would interrupt my feelings of despair, and provide some clues as to how I might respond. When I began, I walked in despair, cataloguing the damage on each visit, writing tirades that ached with my externalised blame and internalised shame. The pain of the claypans is not isolated to introduced species or a lack of management or wanton disregard; it is entangled in all of these things and underwritten by colonialism, which, as a settler descended person, I am squarely implicated. Rose's writing on situatedness in the Anthropocene, which positions us all as "hero, victim and villain" (*Anthropocene* 215), pushed me to interrogate how I might "hold onto the possibility of decent action" (215).

*I went looking for hope at the clay pans this morning, because as MK Turner says, country is always there, underneath, and as Deborah Bird Rose says, there is love, as well as violence. And so, I carried these two ideas with me as I walked in freezing winds. Past claypans which are mud and old car parts, past tracks cut into the earth, over plants. Past old pots and asthma puffers and discarded underwear, until I came upon a place where I hoped that hope would be. And it was. There on the mounds where Landcare had cleared back the buffel weed, kangaroo grass had sprouted. It is a common species that grows longer seeds inland so they can travel further to take root. It produces more seed in dry times. It seems adaptive to climate change. Hope can be small, and hard to recognise, it could be easier to overlook resilience when surrounded by what is being trashed. It can be hard to see past the grief but there is beauty still, and the humble work of not abandoning is an expression of love.*

As I continued my experiments, I began to take instructive provocations from the texts that encouraged me to take notice of alternatives to a singular narrative of destruction and hopelessness. MK Turner writes on the resilience of culture within the land, using the analogy of a tree branch; "the solid wood is inside—that's where the beauty is" (46). As I walked with MK Turner's words, I attuned myself to the resilience of life at the claypans, whilst still bearing witness to the damage being done to the land. As I attempted to hold both damage and resilience within my gaze, I was reminded that "the project of reconciliation demands of us that we acknowledge the divide and the violence, but simultaneously demands that we explore entanglements of memory, connection and commitment" (Rose, *Reports* 185). Encountering the

native grasses was a turning point in my walking and thinking with the claypans. It reminded me that life is still flourishing, despite all the destruction. *The humble work of not abandoning* is a reference to Rose's blog post "Hope is the Way of the World."

*The first thing you see are the tyre ruts, eating into the clay, and tearing up the base of the 12 interconnected claypans that hold water here. They are broken in ways I do not understand. I only know they don't hold water like they used to. The delicate meniscus of mud separates and re-forms, cracking where it no longer holds water. There is so much grief here. It seems like every time I come there is more destruction. I've started looking for hope on my visits and this morning I seek out native grasses regrowing on a cleared mound. On my way over I find myself stopping suddenly at tracks. Emu tracks. I've never seen them here. I photograph them, double check on Google, message them (photographs) excitedly to friends. Sitting on the hill near the new native grass re-  
turning, I reflect on the resilience of life. The mud, the grass, the emu, keep doing the business of life. How do we support this business of living? How do we continue to turn towards life? How to honour the small struggles of others in a way that births humble, tangible actions of hope? All of this is resistance to the narrative of foregone.*

**Fig. 3** Postcard image, Ilparpa Claypans, Arrernte land, June 14th 2019. Sent to Dougald Hine, Cambridgeshire, United Kingdom. Photo © Kelly Lee Hickey





Both loss and resilience are emplaced, experienced in the local and the specific (Rose, *Reports* 49). Recognising the return of native grasses at the claypans did not erase the pain of witnessing the ongoing damage. Instead, it offered me a different narrative thread that I could pay attention to, and learn from. After my encounter with the grasses, I began to focus on Rose's idea of "resilience facilitation" (48). In contrast to suppressing or controlling Nature's processes, resilience facilitation "involves observing Nature's processes and then working to facilitate the conditions under which Nature's resilience can flourish" (48). Encountering emu prints at the claypans reminded me of how little I know and understand about the natural processes of place. Within this not knowing, there is the capacity for wonder. The emu tracks humbled me and gave me a greater sense of my responsibility to place. If life is still growing and moving across this land, then I can respond in ways that learned from and honoured its presence. Recognising my entanglements with the damage to place, I am responsible not only to witness the damage, but to move with, and in care of, that life.

## **Part 2. Shadow Work**

I returned from *Ngā Tūtaki – Encounter/s: Agency, Embodiment, Exchange, Ecologies* in Aotearoa New Zealand in December 2019 to a country on fire and a world that continues to be changed. All through January my social media news feed filled with images of catastrophic bushfires. In Mparntwe/Alice Springs, a different climate devastation unfolded. Central Australia braced itself for another summer of record-breaking heatwaves, the like of which were not expected by CSIRO until 2030 (Allam and Evershed). The rising heat and dwindling rainfall turbocharged existing inequalities in housing and water security. Local politicians began to discuss the possibility of the interior becoming uninhabitable (Allam and Evershed). It felt as if the climate changed future I'd been reading about for so many years had finally arrived.

I witnessed these events from the comfort of air conditioning, my privilege protecting me from the direst effects of the heatwaves. In the evenings I returned to the Ilparpa claypans, walking amidst the dying mulga trees and plumes of dust. As the buffel grass shrivelled and died, the extent of rubbish dumping became more apparent. My despair at the destruction of place became heightened. Remembering Rose's writing on resilience facilitation (alluded to above), it no longer felt enough to walk and think. In a small gesture of care for place, I began to pick up rubbish as I walked and take it with me back home.

Bearing witness to the destruction of place requires us to “take up a moral burden” (Rose, *Reports* 51). Witnessing thrusts us into responsibility, “engages with our moral relationships with the past, acknowledges our violence and works dialogically towards alternatives” (31). As I turned over some of the objects I’d collected as rubbish, I contemplated how, as a settler person, I was entangled in the specific devastation of the Ilparpa Claypans and how this devastation might be linked to broader patterns of ecological and social crisis.

As I began to engage with salvaged objects from the claypans, I moved from digital photography and postcards to cyanotypes. Somerville writes on “the epistemological relationship with the objects and technologies, that we, in the process of becoming-other, can intentionally manipulate” (340) as we explore and learn with/in place. Different mediums have different histories and offer different ways of engaging with and learning about the material world. Cyanotypes were widely used by field naturalists, as exemplified by Anna Aitken’s *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*, and were the primary method of copying architectural and technical drawings up until the 1950s (Ware). These parallel histories of documentation in the organic and industrial world drew me to the medium as a method for exploring situated knowledge at the intersections of my settler body, dumped objects, and the Ilparpa claypans.

The bright days of the Central Australian summer offered plentiful amounts of UV required to expose the cyanotype prints. Through January 2020 I fell into a rhythmic cycle of making—walking in the early morning, printing in the middle of the day, painting more cyanotype paper at night. I would lay objects on paper and expose them at solar noon, watching the UV interact with the chemical dyed paper, turning it from green to yellow to slate grey. As I dunked the prints in water to process the image, the negative space of the object appeared as white against the deep blue of the cyanotype.

Through this process I began to understand the salvaged objects as settler artefacts—material manifestations of the dissociative hunger of settler colonialism. The negative space of the objects in the prints reminded me of Rose’s writing on “wholeness hunger” as a condition of the fragmented cultures of modernity, and the danger of projecting settler dreams of belonging and connection onto Aboriginal people, land, and culture (181). The shadows in the prints also reminded me of Plumwood’s shadow places and the invisibility of these object’s provenance. As I extended my vision to the fragmented and multi-placed lives of each of these objects, I began to understand something of the kinship between dump and the quarry—how objects move through my hands momentarily, how seldom I think of where they have come from and where they will end up.

Settler colonialism relies on the destruction and control of Indigenous people, culture, and lands (Tuck and Yang 7). It is an ongoing process “reasserted each day of occupation” (6). Settler cultures are “designed not to consider place, as to do so would require a consideration of genocide” (Tuck and McKenzie 635). As colonialism morphs into a global culture of extraction, more of the world is rendered invisible to those of us who consume it. As colonialism claims, it names with a gaze that “distances the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interest of unfettered power” (Haraway, “Situated” 581). Invoking the image of the “fenced colonial big house” (144), Plumwood explains that “this split between a singular, elevated, conscious ‘dwelling’ place and the multiple disregarded places of economic support is one of the most important contemporary manifestations of the mind/body split” (146).

I created *Shadow Work* to unsettle the monolithic invisibility of my settler gaze by situating my experiences at the Ilparpa Claypans. In contrast to the eye that “sees everything from nowhere” (581), Haraway advocates for “partial, locatable, critical knowledge, sustaining the possibility of webs of connection called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (584). As an autoethnographic map, *Shadow Work* explicitly locates my particular experience within a particular settler culture, and examines this cultural position in relationship to the particular place of the Ilparpa Claypans, in the particular time of the summer of 2019.

*Shadow Work* is constructed from fragments of text and cyanotypes (Figure 4). This fragmentation alludes to the incompleteness of my situated knowledge. During the map’s creation I moved back and forth between my field notes and the cyanotypes, finding connections between text and the symbols that emerged from the cyanotypes. A rusted pipe became a trench carved into the claypans by 4WDs, twisted wire and a broken O ring became the tree where we laid a friend’s ashes to rest. The map documented the damage to the claypans—the “terrible histories” and “damaged places” (Rose, *Ethics* 22) that are the legacy of settler colonialism. It also showed moments of care, connection, and the resilience of life in that place because “violence is not the whole story” and “entanglements give us grounds for action” (22).

*Shadow Work* was exhibited as part of *Groundswell: movements in art and territory*, a curated touring exhibition that positions “artists as some of the first responders” to the climate crisis (Artback NT). Presenting *Shadow Work* within this exhibition brings my situated knowledge into dialogue with other Northern Territory artists engaging with issues of water security, place and culture across a range of geographical, cultural and practice backgrounds. As the exhibition toured throughout the Northern Territory through 2020 and 2021, dialogues were opened between the works and different



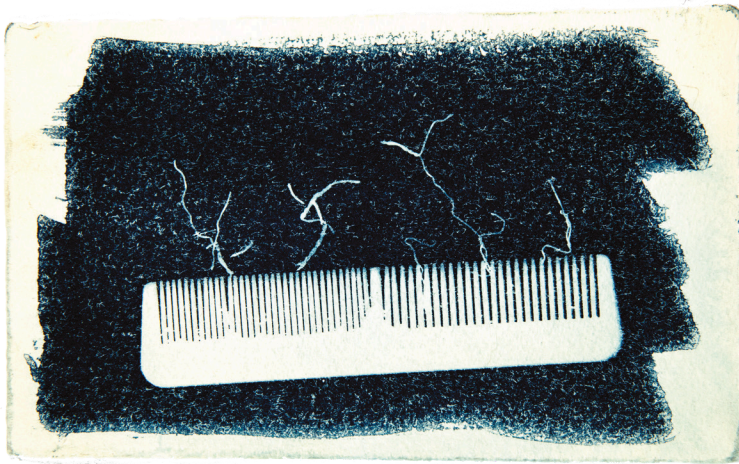
**Fig. 4 (Above and overleaf)** Kelly Lee Hickey, *Shadow Work*, exhibited Araluen Arts Centre, March 2021. Photos © Kelly Lee Hickey



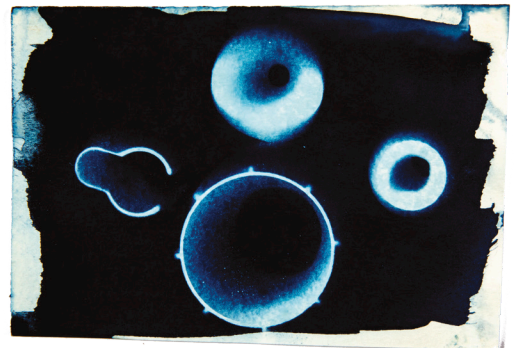
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- Shadow Places is an autoethnographic map made from salvaged rubbish and weeds collected during visits to the 'Ilparpa Claypans' - a series of 12 interconnected claypans located on Arrente land. The map and key, created from fragments of rubbish and field notes document the artists reflections of settler interactions and impacts on this place.
1. the first thing you see are the tyre ruts
  2. the trench cut into the claypans by 4WDs
  3. manifesting in the landscape as 'Wholeness hunger' (Rose, 2004)
  4. where once was clay, there is now only stones
  5. dog prints marked into the mud
  6. a rusted can blending into the dirt
  7. a whole car burned down to the ground
  8. what stories do our remains tell?
  9. landcare, with their buffle busting, brings me hope in this place
  10. the mud, the emus, the grasses keep on doing the business of life
  11. beneath the moon, letting go of a friend
  12. we grieve, the shield shrimps and I

communities. In March 2021 I participated in a public panel as part of the public program in Mparntwe/Alice Springs. The public panel consisted of a floor talk with curator Carmen Ansaldo, presentation alongside fellow exhibiting artist Mel Robson and reflective feedback from Arrernte Elder Elaine Peckham and Director of the Arid Lands Environment Centre, Jimmy Cocking. This diversity of panel presenters offered different perspectives for understanding the work and its relevance to the local community. Carmen spoke to the overall vision of the program, while Mel and I gave more detailed insight into the creation of the works. Elaine centred the concerns of water security within the needs and experience of the Arrernte community, while Jimmy offered an overview of current campaigns to protect Territory ground and surface water from threats such as fracking and large-scale agriculture. The public program was accompanied by a print resource providing information on campaigns and practical actions that community members could take to protect water within the Northern Territory.

## Conclusion

Localised, creative place practice is a way of situating ourselves within a particular planetary aesthetic, and from this very specific place, building webs across the world. Walking with theory as a defamiliarising agent at the Ilparpa Claypans gave me greater insight into my situatedness in place as a settler person. Through a series of returns and iterative making across mediums, I have been able to deepen my understandings about the responsibilities arising from this situatedness, and share these with others through intimate and public artworks. The Ilparpa Claypans continue to be impacted by weeds, dumping and four-wheel driving, and life continues to respond and reach for survival. The challenge of integrating the learning from these creative processes into a practice of taking responsibility for these impacts of settler colonialism on place is ongoing.

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