



CHAPTER 10

Relational Growing Reimagining Contemporary Aboriginal Agriculture in Colonialized Cityscapes

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Introduction

Contemporary Aboriginal food growing and procuring systems and practices are a continuation of over 120,000 years of Aboriginal occupation and cultural practice within the Australian continent (Bowler et al. 2018). Stories within many of our communities place us here since time immemorial. When British colonists arrived on Aboriginal lands, from as long ago as 230 years to as recently as 38 years ago (Mahony 2014), they brought with them many things: feral animals and plants, diseases, ideas of law and ownership, violence and a disregard for the original inhabitants – both human and more-than-human. Along with the destruction of fertile and balanced ecologies and the denuding of the landscape, this process of translocation also saw the overwriting and silencing of Aboriginal peoples' existence, including the vast, sophisticated and interconnected food growing systems that spanned the entire continent (Gerritsen 2008; Gammage 2011; Pascoe 2014).

Aboriginal authors, such as Yuin and Bunurong man Bruce Pascoe (2014), have only very recently promoted the idea of Aboriginal peoples' advanced and regenerative agricultural practices, which is in contrast to many popular and academic discourses that have continued to debase, deny or misunderstand these systems and practices. Goenpul academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015), Christopher Mayes (2018) and others explain this silencing as a continued means of justifying illegal colonial occupation and control of land based on *terra nullius* – a Latin term meaning 'land belonging to no one'. Despite this critical analysis,

little focus has been given to the continued application of cultural food systems and practices in the urban environment, by and for Aboriginal people. This chapter looks to bring further focus and understanding to an underresearched area, and one with a particular absence of Indigenous perspectives that are underpinned by relational practices and positionalities. It draws on relevant research across the disciplines of Indigenous studies, art theory, and urban studies. In addition, it will be backgrounded by my own understanding and experiences as a Gamilaroi First Nations woman – the first generation of my Aboriginal family to be raised almost entirely away from our ancestral homelands, on Yugarrra and Turrbal Country, in an inner-city suburb of Meanjin/Brisbane, on Australia's east coast.

The chapter will explore some of the relevant social, political and cultural realities for Indigenous peoples living within urban environments. It will contextualize customary Aboriginal food systems in general, and highlight the value of creative relational practices in responding to the urban context by providing an agentic methodology through which food-related cultural knowledges and systems can be re-emplaced. I use the term 'relational' here as a kind of culturally relevant, interconnected thinking and collaboration that reinforces kinship and relatedness (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003), facilitates material connection and embodiment (Martin 2013), assists knowledge transference (Reser et al. 2021) and re-asserts connections to place (Cumpston and Beer 2019). After providing background context, the chapter will identify and explore the potential of creative relationality within two practice-led case studies: a bushfoods workshop on an inner-city permaculture farm; and a visual art project centred around bushfood knowledges in the greater Brisbane region.

The Urban Context

In 2016, as many as 81 per cent of the Indigenous population of Australia (around 3.3 per cent of the total Australian population) were recorded as living in cities and non-remote areas, with a continuing upward trend of migration towards urban locales (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2016). Population surveys also highlight that a majority of Indigenous people within these areas are not living on their ancestral homelands, which is consistent with figures that show only around 27 per cent of Indigenous peoples across all regions live on Country¹ (ABS 2019). This settler colonialism-induced diaspora is significant in regard to connection and cultural continuity, as within Aboriginal cultural contexts a relational connection and belonging to one's Country underpins

all aspects of cultural life, epistemology, ontology and identity. Indigenous authors such as Bronwyn L. Fredericks (2013) and Larissa Behrendt (2005) argue for the normalization of Indigenous belonging within the milieu of the urban, despite the diasporic nature of connection. Both highlight the urban as a site of new-found connection at both a community and an individual level. As Berendt states, ‘wherever we have lived there is a newer imprint and history, one that is meaningful and creates a sense of belonging within Aboriginal communities that have formed in urban areas’ (2005: 2). Authors such as Kay J. Anderson (1993) and Sylvia Kleinert and Grace Koch (2012) add to this argument with examples of nationally significant social and political movements that have solidified Aboriginal emplacement in urban environments, and shaped urban identities and discourses.

Despite these social and political efforts and positionings of connectedness, the broader reality for Aboriginal peoples within the urban is that there remains limited opportunity for stakeholderism, autonomous control or determination of urban spaces. For example, the 1993 Native Title Act, a piece of Australian Government legislation that looked to overturn the perceived non-existence of Aboriginal peoples’ connection to the land prior to colonization and to establish some level of land access and management provision for Traditional Owners, is almost impossible to apply to greater metropolitan areas. The 1993 Native Title Act cannot be applied to private freehold land, leasehold land, land for public works or other types of land tenures that make up a majority of the urban built environment. This is in stark contrast to the application of Native Title, Land Rights and other Indigenous Land Use agreements in the less developed and so-called ‘unused’ spaces of national parks and nature reserves, which have more recently incorporated a degree of Indigenous consultation within their management by government departments. A critical researcher in the field of urban environments, Libby Porter, attests that the recent shift towards Indigenous participation in Australian land tenure and management has ‘barely touched urban Australia’, and that ‘public and policy discussion about the future of urban Australia is framed as if Indigenous people were not present, and as if cities were not built on Aboriginal land’ (Porter 2016, para. 2; see also Wensing and Porter 2015). Through the one-sided application of colonial ideals embedded in urban planning, property rights and land division and use, for example, Indigenous perspectives and ways of being – including the application of urban food growing – are continually overshadowed, limited and/or replaced by colonial political and economic order (Wolfe 2006; Cavanagh and Veracini 2013).

This lack of policy recognition reflects commonly held, mainstream preconceptions that ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ Aboriginal people live in remote areas, not the urban spaces of cities and large towns (Fredericks 2008; Fredericks, Leitch and Barty 2008). Indigenous ‘invisibility’ within the urban not only limits the available government and public funding or support for urban food growing initiatives, but also coincides with what Emily Brand, Chelsea Bond and Cindy Shannon (2016) refer to as a ‘mainstreaming’ of urban Indigenous issues and services. While this argument was made in relation to Indigenous health, it contextualizes the way in which many current applications of urban Aboriginal food systems and practices have been mainstreamed into Western models of agriculture, such as the introduction of native food and medicine plants in Western-styled and operated ‘community gardens’, or larger systems of monocultural growing and commodification. Revealingly, while the bushfoods industry in Australia is estimated to be worth around \$20 million, Indigenous peoples’ participation is estimated to be only 1 per cent (Higgins 2019). As such, the urban provides a challenging ideological space from which urban Aboriginal food growing needs to emerge – and be viewed in its own right – as an extension of ancient, relational systems and practices in the physically changed, transcultural spaces of the urban environment.

Relational Growing

Aboriginal food systems prior to colonization were a functional part of a holistic understanding of, and caring for Country, through the management of larger interconnected ecosystems spanning the entire continent. These management practices included the sharing of resources, and the strategic and responsive application of fire, as well as the use of native grasses, seasonal hunting, collecting and other practices to manage animal and plant populations on a broader scale (Gammage 2011; Pascoe 2014; Steffensen 2020). Importantly, land management and food growing happened in collaboration between nations and tribal groups through foodways and trade routes that criss-crossed the entire country. All these aspects were inseparable from, and supported by, Aboriginal peoples’ relational kinship systems and obligations between humans and more-than-humans, dreaming tracks, songlines, and performative, creative practices such as dance, story, song and mark-making. Despite the violence of settler colonialism enacted upon both Aboriginal people and the landscape, and the disruption or displacement of these systems and practices, many still exist today. However, the question remains,

how can urban spaces, which have altered the physical, cultural and ecological landscape, and which provide little autonomy or visibility for Aboriginal peoples, be the locus for continued, cultural food growing systems and practices?

In correspondence with a friend and fellow urban-based, Gamilaroi yinarr/woman living away from Country about two medicinal uraah/eremophila saplings in her backyard that have withstood various mowing accidents and the poor-quality soils of her small rental property, she expressed their presence as her daily connection to Country and healing. For me, this reflected how our relationships to our plants, to our Country and to our community – and our obligations to care for them – is untouched and eternal, even within the changed spaces of the urban. It also highlighted the fundamental aspects of all Aboriginal peoples' 'relational existence' – that is, an ontological positioning of 'living relatedness', or an existence made possible only through our active and participatory relationships with people, place and Country (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003).

Many authors have spoken to relationality within an Australian Indigenous context (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003; Martin 2013; Williams et al. 2018; Brigg, Graham and Weber 2021), although very few have applied and or researched its methodological potential specifically within an urban food growing and procuring context. This contrasts with recent scholarship speaking to Indigenous, relational food practices in North America and Aotearoa, for example (Poe et al. 2014; Manson 2015; Reid and Rout 2016). The term 'relational' can and has been used in a variety of contexts and disciplines. While I apply it here to food-related practices, I borrow some of its meaning from within a participatory, creative practice akin to established notions of socially engaged art (Springgay 2011), relational aesthetics (Downey 2007; Ali 2020) and methexical praxis (Martin 2013). While these constructs are predominantly written from Western academic paradigms, I use them consciously to more easily capture and translate – but not reduce or misrepresent – the foundational aspects of Indigenous customary culture and cultural practices as being inseparable from relational, creative and artistic ontologies (Clothilde Bullen in Baum 2017). I also use these creative contexts to generalize the experience of relationality across various Aboriginal cultural groups and individuals, acknowledging the diversity of experiences and cultural connections, particularly within the milieu of the urban.

A creative, relational practice will be explored in the following two case studies. Many aspects will be explicit, however it is important first to outline some general aspects of relational practice and its function.

Firstly, as mentioned, relationality underpins Aboriginal cultural ontologies – or ways of knowing, being and doing. So, in the ‘doing’ of relational practice, such as the making and strengthening of connections between people, place and the more-than-human, we are methodologically asserting and reinstating culture, regardless of the physical expression or outcome. Cultural relationality operates beyond superficial or visual expression, such as one’s appearance, and the adoption of Western material culture. Relationality is also an acknowledgement of interconnected thinking and collaboration (Graham 1999; Martin 2013), reinforcing Aboriginal food systems based on kinship and relatedness – a framework that can help to mend the gaps of colonial fragmentation, loss and/or disruption of cultural knowledge. As an extension of this idea, Muruwari, Bundjalung and Kamilaroi academic Brian Martin articulates that the relational engagement with materials and objects can be a means through which the doer can embody or ‘become’ the materials themselves (Martin 2013). Aboriginal people can reinstate spiritual and totemic connections to plants, foods and medicines as embodiments of Country, where those deep empathetic links have been severed or forgotten. Lastly, a creative, relational practice is significant as a means through which to learn and share knowledge. This kind of multidimensional and multidisciplinary pedagogy, used by Aboriginal people and communities to carry and relate knowledge over millennia, is proven to be extremely effective to retain information and apply in dynamic contexts (Reser et al. 2021). Art theorist Jacques Rancière also highlights the potential of the relational in knowledge transference, in that such happenings involve a ‘community of narrators and translators’ who are active in engaging with a dialogue from which they can access and internalize critical and experiential wealth (Rancière 2009: 22). Thus, relational practice not only transfers information, but can make information personal and meaningful.

Case Studies

Footways, Our Ways, Always: First Nations Urban Food Growing and Food Usage Workshop

In early autumn 2021, I helped to facilitate a First Nations bushfoods workshop in conjunction with Northey Street City Farm (NSCF), as part of my PhD research into contemporary, urban-based cultural food growing. NSCF is Brisbane city’s first community garden, created in 1994, and comprises approximately 2.4 hectares of council-owned land that has over time been revegetated with various edible and non-edible plants,

including native foods and medicines. Most plants are rainforest species, or those found within subtropical climates similar to the Brisbane region, such as Aniseed and Lemon Myrtles, Lemon Aspen, Kangaroo Grass, Finger Limes, Sandpaper Figs and Davidson Plums. The original site for the farm was unvegetated, degraded land that had been vacant since major flooding in the area, and many native plants were planted within the last decade. The farm is leased and managed by a non-Indigenous, not-for-profit organization that opens the garden to staff, volunteers, allotment holders and participants in workshops and events (E. Brindal 2021, pers. comm., 16 April). The bushfoods workshop comprised three relational parts: a walking tour of the farm's native food and medicine plants, in which participants could smell, touch and taste the plants as well as learn information about their cultivation and use; preparation of various bushfoods in modern cuisine with an opportunity to eat them during a shared lunch; and a seed-ball-making activity using gararr/Kangaroo Grass through which participants were able to reflect and distribute native grass seeds within their local communities after conclusion of the workshop. The ten participants were diverse in age and gender, and represented several different Aboriginal nations, including Yuggara, on whose Country the workshop took place.

As the group moved through the farm on the walking tour, various individuals were able to share their own local information around particular plants. For example, the site contained a mature Bonye/Bunya tree, which is sacred to various groups such as the Jinibara and Kabi Kabi peoples. The Bonye was and is at the centre of a large cultural gathering that, for millennia, has coincided with the tree's fruiting, and that sees groups from far-reaching parts of the country, including Gami-laroi people, coming together for feasting, marriage, trade and other cultural business. The opportunity to be in the presence of and to feel, smell and taste the nuts of the Bonye allowed individuals to have the space and provocation to share their personal and community connections to the gathering and to the tree. Discussions around the Bonye also included the way the presence of precolonial Bonye trees, and other tree species, can serve as markers for traditional walking paths, trade routes and foodways. This activity led to conversations around knowledges of precolonial, local food trees that were still existing on verges, near car parks or at the intersection of major roadways. Despite the landscape being so severely changed since colonization, relational connections such as these allowed the opportunity to piece back together and coalesce customary connections to ancestral Country with our new urban 'homes' on others' Country. This type of knowledge mapping also redresses the invisibility of Aboriginal occupation and continued

presence in the landscape, and the invisibility of food growing and sharing systems more generally.

The sensory participation with various plants on the site also conjured personal memories – such as salt bush, which reminded one participant of her childhood garden and the way she and her family would use the salt bush to make medicinal balms. For me, many of the plants that I smelt and tasted for the first time also stirred a kind of bodily remembering – as if reconnecting with something genetically or culturally akin. Work around the connections between food, sensory experiences and memory have been undertaken by various scholars (Lupton 1994; Springgay 2011; Allen 2012). Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) in particular highlights the value of sensory or affective pedagogy, articulating that this type of relational engagement or ‘knowing’ – which, she argues, precedes intellectualized thought – provides an ‘anomalous place of learning’ in which both knowledge and knowing can be activated and transferred within a specific time and place-based context. The multi-modal learning that unfolded during the walking tour was significant in reflecting the participatory learning pedagogies of Indigenous cultural contexts, where stories and events are attached to, in this case, particular plant species to build a fabric of relational and accessible information. For example, when I think about salt bush now, not only do I think about the plant and its uses, but I also think about the individual who shared that story, and her connection to her place and ancestors. In this sense, knowledge is embodied and has dynamic ‘aliveness’ through its relational contexts.

The final two parts of the workshop included the preparation of native greens and herbs into meals, which were shared over lunch, and a seed-ball-making workshop, where native Kangaroo Grass seeds were made into clay and compost balls that could be dried, stored and used to propagate the seeds into the future. Kangaroo Grass was chosen as it is a ubiquitous native grain that was commonly used by Aboriginal peoples across Australia to make flour for bread. It is also a highly significant habitat species for butterflies and other key species required for ecosystem health. Both these activities provided the space for participants to be together, talk, and build relationships while making, sharing and interacting with materials from Country. The seed-ball-making process included potent conversations around their ability to be deployed to grow the Kangaroo Grass where access is restricted, such as public parks and vacant lots, and private sites that are overrun by introduced plants species. It also provoked a remembering and oral mapping of personal sites and spaces, prompting an awareness of participants’ more-than-human surrounds, as well the restrictions placed upon their access. In response,

one participant threw a handful of seed balls around the edges of a car park near the NSCF site, which was dominated by invasive grasses and bushes. Others planned to deploy them onto public parks and street verges after the workshop.

Through holding the workshop, relationships were also built between Aboriginal participants and the NSFC. This event brought cross-cultural dialogue and an awareness of Aboriginal connection to the site, as well as to the specific food plants it contained. This opened discussion around the intellectual cultural property and cultural protocols associated with the plants and their use – aspects that are often neglected through the silencing of Aboriginal peoples' connection and custodianship of place. After the workshop, NSCF expressed a desire to open the space further and more meaningfully to Indigenous engagement, participation and use. For example, they have extended the opportunity for Aboriginal people to take cuttings of some native plants for personal use, as well as holding monthly events to swap and exchange native plants. Thus, the grassroots, relational aspects of the workshop have softened some of the previously hard boundaries of non-Indigenous land ownership towards what will hopefully be a more mutual and shared connection to space and place.

Bush Tucker, Skin Country and Black Seeds Cloak Projects

I was privileged to participate in the relational, practice-led arts research undertaken by Wathurang artist and academic Dr Carol McGregor, along with other members of the Brisbane Aboriginal community. McGregor's practice allows for insightful discussion around the value of relational arts practices in urban spaces within the contexts of urban Aboriginal food and plant knowledges. Here I refer to the Bush Tucker Community Cloak, Black Seeds and Skin Country cloak projects – just three examples of McGregor's extensive, possum skin cloak making across the greater Brisbane region. As part of her doctoral research entitled 'Art of the Skins', McGregor facilitated numerous workshops that engaged hundreds of individuals from various Aboriginal nations across the region to connect and share knowledges towards the revitalization of customary possum skin cloak making – a practice that had been lying dormant in the region since early colonial settlement (McGregor 2019). As per its customary context, each cloak functioned as a kind of canvas to record or visually represent individual and collective stories, knowledges and customary connections. While the various cloak projects produced beautiful, cultural objects, the less tangible outcomes of the projects lay in the process of the making: the coming together of var-

ious peoples to talk, connect, remember and share knowledges (ibid.). These projects also held space for what Martin (2013) understands as a methexical process of performative ‘connection’ and ‘embodiment’ with people and place, facilitated by the handling of and collaboration with materials – in this case, the skins of animals and ochres (earth pigments that hold cultural significance to various Aboriginal groups) from Country.

The Bush Tucker Community Cloak, made in 2017, incorporated individual panels from twenty Indigenous people connected through the Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art at Griffith University. All participants were residing in greater Brisbane at the time, however the composition of the group included individuals whose customary lands were located across Australia. The cloak was made during a one-day workshop that required participants, including myself, to create individual panels that would then be sewn together to make a cloak, with the specific theme of bushfoods or ‘bush tucker’ – a colloquial term meaning native food plants and animals. The process of making the Bush Tucker Community Cloak facilitated discussion around the stories and knowledges relating to each panel. For example, my panel included abundant bushfoods from Gamilaroi Country such as bumbal/native orange and ngaybaan/native passionfruit, as well as introduced species such as nasturtiums, which my grandmother would eat during times of hardship while living in inner-city Warrang/Sydney. Others included stories of goanna, witchetty grubs, emu and turtle from across Australia. The sharing of these stories through the cloak-making process not only helped with reinvigorating specific food knowledges, but it also provided opportunities to find the kinship, geographic, ecological and other cultural intersections and connections between various nations that plants and animals traditionally facilitated.

Like the Bush Tucker Community Cloak, the Black Seeds (2016) and Skin Country (2018) cloak projects speak to the breadth and diversity of connected plant-based food and medicine knowledges from Indigenous peoples belonging to or bordering the greater Brisbane area, such as the Turrbal, Yuggara, Quandamooka, Yugambah, Jinibara, and Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi nations. Different to the Bush Tucker Cloak, these cloaks were created solely by Carol McGregor after lengthy discussions, bush walks and yarns² with Elders and community members, and the handling, smelling and tasting of relevant plants. The Black Seeds and Skin Country cloaks depict a large number of culturally significant plant species endemic to the region, placed onto the cloaks using forms of customary pokerwork and ochre colouring. The cloaks depict Maiwar – a Yuggara/Turrbal word for the Brisbane River, which intersects the city,

and which McGregor uses as a reference point to position the plants as accurately as possible in their precolonial locations. Interestingly, many names of suburbs in and around Brisbane still reflect their connection to these plants. For example, the suburb of Geebung was named after the persoonia tree – a highly prized edible fruit that was in abundance in the area, similar to the areas of Doomben (fern tree), Dakabin (grass tree), Boondal (from bundal or cunjevoi) and Wynnum (from winnam or pandanus) (McGregor 2019). Despite the overlay of colonial infrastructure and built environment, the destruction of so many pre-existing plants, trees and ecologies, and the limitations of communities being able to access and care for sites due to government control, the relational creation of these cloaks asserted continued connections, custodial knowledges and sovereignties of Aboriginal peoples to these areas. While the mapping of the plants is a visual representation of precolonial ecologies, it is also a mapping of people's ongoing social-political connections and responsibilities, and of kinship between nations and between the human and more-than-human. For example, Carol McGregor highlights how various plant species grew across diverse tribal regions, and how associated groups could 'relate and remember similar stories and uses of plants' (McGregor 2019: 99). This interconnectivity of ecologies, reinforced by story, song and language, binds various groups' relational connection. As McGregor states, 'I am drawn to how native plants anchor these systems. All were and are intertwined, touching one another, and I am in awe of the enormity of this multifaceted connected picture' (ibid.: 102). The making of these cloaks holds space for individuals and communities to remember and reassert these connections and knowledges, and to provide a valuable reference for food systems and practices into the future. Or as McGregor states, 'privileging Indigenous intellectual sovereignty in Black Seeds signifies the Aboriginal plant knowledge held by Ancestors and the strong continuum of this knowledge in our contemporary communities' (ibid.: 27).

Conclusion

Since colonization, the environments of cities and towns have remained places of belonging for Traditional Owners, and have become places of belonging for many dispersed Aboriginal peoples and communities. Despite being overlaid by the dominance of the colonial-built environment, colonial ideologies, and government control and determination over land use and management, they are still Country, representing fer-

tile sites for the continuation of Aboriginal food systems and practices. As demonstrated by the two case studies, a relational creative practice has the capacity to reconnect stories and re-embed knowledges, regardless of how physical environments may have changed, or where the migration of Aboriginal peoples away from customary homelands may have occurred. Importantly, a relational creative practice facilitates a dynamic and multi-modal kind of knowledge exchange, which can extend beyond the intellectual acquisition of information, to the embodied understanding of our empathetic connection to Country, and to the more-than-human entities therein. This can be effective with only minimal, or decontextualized materials from Country, through, for example, the touching, smelling, tasting and using of leaves, furs, seeds, ochres and foods. A relational creative practice can also discern and strengthen relationships between people – a functional way to remember and re-instate the socio-political kinships that supported large-scale, holistic food systems prior to colonisation, as well as helping to build practical, contemporary networks for resource and material sharing. This is significant in regard to the economic disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal peoples as a legacy of colonial land theft and unpaid labour, and responds to the ideological landscape where urban-based Indigenous peoples are rendered invisible or ‘mainstreamed’, and where cultural and autonomous food practices are not supported. Despite the apparent incongruence between customary Aboriginal food systems, knowledges and practice, and contemporary colonized, urban Australia, a relational creative practice can bring adaptability and relevance-making. Within the relational place and moment of coming together, interacting, sharing, making and responding, knowledge is ‘alive’ and responsive, and can therefore be applied to, and hold meaning within, various changing contexts. In ‘doing’ relational creative practice, we are practising a foundational aspect of culture, and by applying relational creative practice to contemporary food systems and practices, we are resisting ongoing colonization from an autonomous position – literally and metaphorically in our own ‘backyards’.

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Notes

1. In an Aboriginal context the term ‘Country’ is an animate and sentient concept that encompasses all aspects such the ground, sea and sky – and the ancestors, beings, stories and knowledges contained therein. It speaks to ‘an interdependent relationship between an individual and their ancestral lands and seas . . . sustained by the environment and cultural knowledge’ (Common Ground n.d.).
2. A culturally ascribed and cooperative, conversational process specific within Indigenous contexts that involves the telling and sharing of stories and information (Walker et al. 2014).

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