



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## BECOMING ENTANGLED: QUEER ATTACHMENTS WITH HEMIPARASITES

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*What is that queer plant that drapes itself chaotically over the top of trees and bushes? You know the one along the road on the way into town?*

*Ah yes! You mean the one with no leaves that looks like tangled yarn caught up in the branches?*

*Yes, it looks like its floating airborne on top of the canopy, smothering and embracing at the same time.*

*Well, that's the one with the common name of snotty gobble or Dodder-laurel!*

*I can't stop thinking about it.*

*Dodder may look chaotic but that only depends on how you view it.*

*Let's find out what it's doing.*

'If we can "see" the vegetal world once more, we might remember what we are. Plants are the key to curing vegetal blindness'. (Gibson 2018,1)

## Introduction

We write from the unceded lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung people in what is now known as central Victoria, Australia. Our homes on the edge of the range are surrounded by a complex mix of native vegetation, invasive plants, garden plants, recovering landscapes, and various colonial remains overlaying Dja Dja Wurrung country: an assemblage that is typical of settler colonial lands after more than two centuries of dispossession, settlement, 'improvement' and degradation. This area has been shaped by colonial extractivism, firstly in the form of violent dispossession and settler pastoralism that was quickly superseded by extensive and intense gold mining. In the 1840s, Europeans and their sheep invaded Victoria displacing local Indigenous peoples and parcelling up the productive land among the squatters. However, it was the 'discovery' of gold in 1851 that most profoundly shaped the region. By 1852, 40,000 people had swarmed onto the local goldfields and the wide scale destruction of the land commenced leaving a completely transformed landscape, hydrology, vegetation and ecology (Annear 2012; Boyce 2012).

Today we live in a recuperating environment of coppiced trees—mostly Box and Stringybark with a few Ironbark—and an understory of acacia, herbaceous shrubs and various groundcovers. You have to be careful where you walk as the ground is littered with pits and ruins, and extensive erosion has formed deep gullies with unstable edges. We also have to be careful not to damage the mosses, small perennials and wildflowers that carpet the ground. The eucalyptus dominated forest is a colonial artefact. The earliest settlers reported sweeping expanses dominated by banksia along with drooping sheoaks, wild cherry and acacia. It is the hardy gums that have been best able to persist the onslaught of colonisation and mining (Lunt 2013).

The vitality and dynamism of nature is evident in this renewed, and indeed novel, plant assemblage that is considered to be 'characteristic' of central Victorian Box-Ironbark forests today. As the miners retreated due to declining gold harvest, trees resprouted from stumps and plants took over the ground. The plants knitted and knotted bits of the old and the new into a complex habitat, creating an emergent natureculture of postcolonising, recuperating lands. The vegetal volunteers that sprouted and the remnants that expanded actively generated the present-day landscape. Much of this area is now part of The Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park, and the 'resilience of natural features in the face of change' was noted as a key value in setting up the park (Frost 2010; Instone 2017). The resistance, power and agency of plants continues to astound and surprise us.

Although scarred, this is a vibrant, changing, and exciting place. It provokes us to forge 'risky attachments' with unlike others across the human non-human divide (Instone 2015). This is not an idealistic gesture, but an 'active relation of hope and connection in which we cannot predict the outcomes, where we risk opening ourselves to possibility' (29). Stengers says it is the risk of hope, feeling and thinking that 'oblige me to think and feel in a new way,' a way that induces 'the powerful sense that something else is possible' (Stengers in Zournazi 2002, 246, 248).

This paper explores how we became ensnared by the plant agencies of the local hemiparasites—Dodder-laurel, Mistletoe and Cherry Ballart<sup>1</sup>—through reflecting back on our multispecies and human interactions in the course of developing the art project *Becoming Differently* (2018). We trace how plant parasites came to be an important theme of the art, how they infiltrated the artworks, how they changed our understanding of parasites, and how they enticed us into the bush and developed our style of collaboration. During the development of *Becoming Differently*, the agency of plants crept in to extend and deepen the exhibition theme of unsettled belonging. Almost by default we experienced a 'learning to be affected' in Bruno Latour's terms of being 'moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or non-humans' (2004, 2). The plants drew us into further investigation of the vegetal world.<sup>2</sup>

Further, we are interested to 'queery' what it means to be 'drawn towards' particular plants, we wonder who or what is 'drawing,' and how these particular plants inflected our art and writing and drew us into a queer world of 'unconventional' relations. We consider how we grappled with practices and modes of engagement involving complex issues of identity, belonging and nature in a settler-colonial situation, and how this led to us to become differently entangled in place.

We take our lead on queer worlding from Donna Haraway (2008, 2016) and from the parasitic vine Dodder-laurel itself. They both teach us about entanglement and the dangers of sorting, neatening and categorisation that draw boundaries and make regulatory structures. Both Haraway and dodder insist that we be *in* the tangle in a multidirectional mode, finding meaning through being present in the mess and complexity of 'being-with.' As Haraway says, 'queer reworlding depends on reorientating the human [...]' (2016, xxvi). 'Queering,' she says, 'has the job of undoing "normal" categories, and none is more critical than the human/nonhuman sorting operation' (xxiv). Haraway's notion of queer worlding interrogates the way we think of species as discrete types. She conjures a 'dance of kin and kind' to escape the strictures of dualistic constructions of sex and race, instead thinking in terms of 'with' and 'across.' Haraway uses the figure of messmates at the table to invoke the queer relations of transpecies kin entanglements, construing the companionship of eating together, queer kin at the table, as outside of, and questioning of, heteronormative and anthropocentric conventions. This is a never finished meal, always in process, always in relation, but 'complete with all the acidic consequences for all the diners' (xxvi). Likewise, dodder's parasitic habits stretch what it means to sup together, amplifying the uneasy sense of being off-category.

We understand place as a lived encounter. Our relationship with plants is not primarily academic (although that is part of the story); we are swept up in the 'romance connecting people, plants and place.' In Anna Tsing's terms, we love, we are in love with, this place (Tsing 2012, 145). Our love sits in uneasy relation to the colonial history of this place. As Ginny Battson writes, 'if we see love, instead, as being something other than union, like the mycelium, a passage of consciousness, love may be THE call to act, and a light shining upon not ourselves but those we love' (2015, emphasis in original).

In the paper we pick up on Haraway's insistence of speculative practice to encourage us, indeed demand, an openness to including dream, art, narration and critique in the *how* of investigation.

We follow Prudence Gibson (2018, 12) and others in experimenting with writing style in the hope that we can entangle you the reader in our world and share our complex feelings of love, unease, trepidation and, in the case of the parasitic plants we are writing about here, disconcerting awe.

### Dodder-laurel (*Cassytha melantha*)



*Figure 1: Dodder-laurel entangling the local landscape, Fryerstown. (Image courtesy of Down the Road Projects, 2020)*

We have been driving past this veiled site for years, but it was only after we realised what it was, that it drew us like a magnet, and still does. On the way to this spot we pass tangled tree tops, massed with stringy vines that weave, drape, entwine and appear to smother the roadside trees. The trees are like sentinels presaging the shrouded site to come. Driving from our homes towards town, the road takes a sharp left turn at the top of a crest before descending towards the creek. It cuts through a moderately steep-sided cutting with no space to stop and where it is too dangerous to slow right down. On the left-hand slope is a dense mix of mostly small gums and wattles, and invasive plants such as gorse. Laying over the top of the entire slope is a thick veil, a meshwork, of the hemiparasite Dodder-laurel. This tangled, messy, shocking, snarled and jumbled scene fills us with a mix of awe and disconcertment. What also makes this site compelling is its unapproachability. Despite our longing to get a closer look at this extraordinary confusion of plants, we have to content ourselves with quick glimpses from the car window as we travel at speed on the country road. We've tried to approach it on foot, but due to the particular geography of the

position we are forced to gaze at it from above. The dodder takeover of this area is unique to our knowledge. It has so completely smothered this part of the slope that it's surprising that any other plants survive. But they do and the area continues to thrive in its weird confusion. Dodder peaked our curiosity and drew us into a state of action. We had to meet dodder.

Dodder-laurel is not an exotic invasive but a hemiparasite native to this area. Hemiparasites such as Dodder-laurel by definition have the potential for limited photosynthesis therefore producing some of their own energy, and taking from their hosts' water and minerals (Forester n.d.). They do this by making attachments to the stem of the host plant via specialised rootlike structures called haustoria. 'The haustoria enable the xylem, the mineral and water conducting vessels of the parasite, to contact the xylem of the host and extract these precious resources' (Whittington 2017).

Dodder is green, wiry, swirling, matted, encompassing, and it attaches to trees and shrubs with small oblong haustoria every half metre or so. We thought it was a strangler vine and assumed, wrongly as it turns out, that the smothered trees and shrubs would soon be dead, but hemiparasites rely on the host remaining alive for their continued existence. Because of its parasitic, smothering habits, and its apparent weird leaflessness (actually the leaves have shrunk to scales), dodder of all kinds has many names—snotty-gobble, devil's lair, devil's twine, jungle string, love vine, strangle vine, strangle tare, scaldweed, beggarweed, lady's laces, fireweed, wizard's net, devil's guts, devil's hair, devil's ringlet, goldthread, hailweed, hairweed, hellbine, pull-down, strangleweed, angel hair, and witch's hair. Many of these names derive from an unrelated plant *Cuscuta* species, or so-called 'true' dodders. *Cassytha* species (Dodder-laurel) have evolved to mimic *Cuscuta* species, or vice versa, or perhaps they each figured out a form and livelihood that allows them to flourish in certain places as unrelated twins; a form of evolutionary convergence. Strange how plants from different species can find a way to become almost indistinguishable, yet be so different from other members of their own plant family.

Dodder-laurel makes a sort of hairnet in the foliage, a mesh joining unlike plants into a multiple organism. It raises questions of what it means to be a host and to be unwillingly drawn into a wider network of asymmetric and nonreciprocal relations, to no longer be an individual, but caught up in the lives of unlike others. It raises the question of where hospitality and hostility begin and end (Serres 2007, 15).

Dodder's planty agency also ensnared us. We too feel caught up in its hairnet, in multiple ways; not physically, but rather creatively and emotionally, drawn in by a mix of horror and curiosity about its bewildering habits and weird morphology. At first glance the onlooker sees a totality of form, roundedness on the tops of trees, waterfall veil down the slope. But the harder one looks the more blurred and entwined it appears, and we are drawn into dodder's entanglement, and become lost in its apparent mess. There is an urge to neaten and untangle the landscape, to restore the expected sight of trees, shrubs and herbs. But the utter impossibility of this forces acceptance and a giving-in to the beauty and agency of seeming dis-order, a shedding of control that opens us to see Dodder-laurel as simultaneously dangerous and vulnerable and to stay with it in a space of allure and mystery.

## Meeting Dodder-laurel

(A dream)

*He visits his neighbour down the road. She tells him about a dream she had the night before. In the dream she has her long hair cut off. The hairdresser flips her long tresses over the back of the chair and methodically starts cutting. She doesn't dare look in the mirror to see her new look, but concentrates on the growing pile in front of her, admiring the lustre and range of colours that make the hair her hair. 'I'll take it home,' she says, not sure why, or what she'll do with the severed tresses. The hairdresser had put a rubber band around the cut hair to keep it together. But somehow the rubber band strangles her hair, robbing it of life and vitality, so that by the time she gets home and places it on the kitchen table it seems to have died. Haunted by its apparent demise but insistent presence she tosses the hair into the bottom drawer of her wardrobe to forget about it. When she wakes up, she puts her hand to her head and finds that her hair has all gone. In its place grows Dodder-laurel vine. Over night she had become a host, a vector, a target of a parasitic vine. She can feel its suckers attaching, extracting, adhering, feeding, drawing nutrients, growing long tendrils that go off in search of the next anchor point, the next port of sustenance. A tangled green wiry mass blankets her head. (Instone 2018)*

We finally 'met' Dodder-laurel in close proximity when we tracked some down during a walk in the bush. We were able to discern the details and textures of its tangled, leafless stems and noticed its small green berries and aerial habits. Paying attention to dodder's liveliness and vitality, its particular plantiness, dispelled our initial sense of foreboding and menace. After the seeds germinate and it finds a suitable host, dodder abandons its roots and takes off outward and upward, no longer burdened by the earth, by place of origin, by the fertility or not of where the seed has fallen. It heads skyward for an aerial existence of intemperate abandon. Rootless and free it loops and spreads, entangles and enmeshes, reaching across to other plants to enjoin them in its anarchic network. It's an airborne rhizome, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, that eschews roots, branches and leaves. Like other parasites, it finds alternative modes of life that cut across the expected ways of things. Its aerial travels are not arbitrary, as we thought, but rather it searches out its host hunting for the healthiest specimen to engage. It's lively and exploring. Its daring tendrils take off in all directions, its green wiryness weaves complex passageways through trees and shrubs, creating secret spaces where we couldn't see or go; it makes a life among others that exceeds its burden on them.



*Figure 2: Dodder-laurel cascading from treetop, Fryerstown 2020. (Courtesy of Down the Road Projects)*

Japanese gardener Midori Shintani notes, 'Every time we meet a plant, our minds keep moving with feelings of surprise, joy and sometimes fear' (2020, 62). 'A little fear for plants,' Gibson states, 'reminds humans of our true place in the world' and that 'some plants are wicked, some are defiant, and others cannot be controlled' (2018, 2). This describes our feelings meeting dodder. There was initial fear seeing dodder from a distance and the sense of entrapment it created in us as a result of its smothering habit. Now proximity revealed a different experience, a mingling of fascination and growing respect as we came to realise how this plant behaved, tracing paths beyond our comprehension.

When species meet, as Donna Haraway says, the provocation of curiosity leads us to a sense of obligation and deep pleasure (2008, 7). In the physical world as species, we are not companionable with dodder, but not so in the dream state. The dream state brings dodder and person together in a Surreal mixing of species. The person-host gives in and accepts this new corporeal turn as vines replace hair. It is at this point that we are reminded of Cate Sandiland's question of 'who we are to plants [...] not just what plants are to us' (Cielemęcka et al. 2019, 13).

Latour (2004) insists, learning to be affected is a generative interaction. It is not a matter of attuning to a pre-existing world out there—the old human/nonhuman binary—but understanding how the performative interaction of bodies of all kinds is generative of the world. We were being put into 'motion by new entities whose differences are registered in new and unexpected ways' (5). A point reinforced by Haraway when she famously says things don't preexist their relating (2008). Meeting Dodder-laurel enlivened our world and led us to make new linkages and consider different

alignments of things. It disrupted the received meanings and understandings about parasites, about the bush where we live, and we learnt that things fit together in unexpected and multiple ways, and in that performative moment of differentiation we too became differently. Learning to be affected, says Latour (2004), is not about a body taking in more of the world around it; rather, it's about breaking down the subject-object binary and becoming open to being affected. Dodder-laurel opened us to 'see' plants.

Dodder-laurel is part of the fabric of life here, but its smothering habits and strange form force us to think beyond the usual appreciation of the bush as a tree/understory assemblage of different species. Dodder provokes us to face the unsettling situation of a more complex, more differentiated bush landscape, and to understand the plants that make up the bush through a relational lens. In isolation Dodder-laurel appears destructive and problematic, taking over trees and hillsides, but seen through its relations as part of the forest assemblage it is possible to discern the positive and important roles that it and other hemiparasites play in the overall ecology of life in this place. Parasites multiply life beyond considerations of the individual plant. Plant parasites need other plants, and the forest ecology is richer for their existence (Kriedemann 2018, Watson 2009). As Bolton notes, 'The parasite's disruptions, then, do not simply subvert or oppose the structure of the system, but also constitute a necessary event in a process of reconfiguration and renewal of the system' (2016, 2). Dodder refuses symmetry, refuses equilibrium and balanced exchange, it refuses unitary modes of being. Dodder insists on connection, co-production, movement and multiplicity. It puts its stems to a new use to tell different stories of bush life.

### Collaborating with dodder

The masses of dodder vines which hang from trees in the landscape inspired the installation titled *An Indian spice table/dodder vine/mistletoe/haustorium/the dead hair of a cultural geographer/unidentified bird nests/a collapsing form/eucalyptus branch/Swarovski crystals* (2018). It consists of a traditional Indian spice table with a range of materials, predominantly dead dodder, piled high and set against the gallery wall.





*Figure 3: An Indian spice table/dodder vine/mistletoe/haustorium/the dead hair of a cultural geographer/unidentified bird nests/a collapsing form/eucalyptus branch/Swarovski crystals (from of the installation, *Becoming Differently* (2018)). (Image courtesy of the artist)*

(The studio)

*Intrigued by Dodder's entangled forms which were both beautiful in their formal complexity and dangerous in their capacity to snare things, he started to collect them as they fell to the ground, bringing them into the studio and piling them on the table, each supporting the other, allowing the work to build itself as idea, material, form and content coalesced. Serendipitously, another form of collaboration occurred as a native bird built a nest in the developing sculpture, which meant having to wait until the eggs hatched before continuing. This encounter became crucial as he began to understand this sculptural form not just as an artwork. He watched this bird making its nest; collecting, building, producing. As an artist he too was collecting, building and producing. The bird's actions shifted the artist's relationship to process and material. More significantly, it reoriented the experience, performatively creating a more complex artistic methodology that linked the sculpture to the world. He was able to realise that initial fear of the dead dodder gave way to beauty, value and meaning in ways which were felt and experiential. As a migrant, he was building home in the Australian bush and the Australian bush*

*and its habitat was accepting and drawing him into its own space. Beside the aesthetics of form, he became more enthralled in this structural and metaphorical dance between collapse and support and now collaboration, and how this evolving form somehow was able to speak poetically to multiple narratives across time and space, here and there, belonging, cohabitation and reciprocity.*

The installation both emerged from, and worked towards, an aesthetics of interaction and connection, highlighting the inseparability of situation and embodied subjects. The active encounter with dodder in the making of the installation put us into motion. Firstly as encounter in the landscape, then as its form represented photographically and finally as material in the sculpture. It was at this point where the material form of Dodder-laurel became most potent, encompassing, enlivened and enveloping. Working with dodder as material took on its own sense of becoming, expanding the notion of collaboration. It forced a letting go by the artist, and paying attention instead to the potential of what dodder itself could do. In other words, leading and enticing us on what to do next, no longer 'a mere decorative feature subservient to us' (Angelucci 2020). While building the sculpture, the material strangulating form of dodder lent itself to absorbing (literally) the space it occupied, no longer withheld by figure/ground conventions, but rather becoming active in doing its own 'thing.'

'Thing-power,' as Jane Bennett calls it, that is the 'nonhumanity that flows around but also through humans,' drew us into 'greater recognition of the agential powers of natural and artifactual things, greater awareness of the dense web of their connections with each other and with human bodies, and, finally, a more cautious, intelligent approach to our interventions in that ecology' (2004, 349). Importantly, it was the network of relations between us, dodder and the many other elements of the sculpture—the hair, the nests, the spice table, the haustorium—that animated the whole. Bennett explains that 'a material body always resides within some assemblage or other, and its thing-power is *a function of that grouping*. A thing has power by virtue of its operating *in conjunction* with other things' (353–4, emphasis in original). The installation was a sort of active becoming in which we recognised that we could not disentangle ourselves from dodder, as human and plant spun together in a vital materiality of congealing bodies (Bennett 2010). In the exhibition, Dodder filled the space of the gallery in a consuming way, absorbing other material forms embedded in its galaxy.

### Parasite and host

The parasite and the host are conceived as two separate identities linked through an exploitative relation in Western thought. The overarching and singular notion of things parasitic draws on the negative spectre of the vampire, the predator, the unprincipled opportunist. In Western culture, we're inclined to see a victim-freeloader relation that fits with a Darwinian survival of the fittest model. Parasite equals bloodsucker, scrounger, pest, hanger-on, sponger, idler, user, slacker. But such a view limits the possibilities of identity, makes things this or that, one thing or the other, and posits the host and parasite as separate and antagonistic. It narrows focus to the individual level and forgets the wider ecological and community contexts in which host-parasite relations survive and thrive. What is surprising is the many forms that parasites take, the different relations they

make, and their different modes of attachment. A multiplicity of host-parasite relations calls into question received meanings of the parasite as a straightforward and singular relation of dishonorable gain. Some do kill the host, but most don't, and indeed the hemiparasites (or half-way parasites like Mistletoe and Dodder-laurel) rely on the host remaining alive.

Hemiparasites like dodder take and redistribute, they pass on resources from the host to understory species, increasing diversity in their locality of bush. Watson says parasites are keystone resources that boost species richness at the local and regional scales and have a 'disproportionate influence on community composition and ecosystem processes' (2009, 1152). Parasites, he says, redistribute resources at the community level for the common good. They mediate higher concentrations of soil nutrients so that neighbouring plants are enriched, and they provide nesting, food and shelter for birds and animals. Mistletoe, for example, 'By contributing more litter containing more nutrients available over a more extended period,' creates 'dramatic changes in the soil and understory vegetation' (Watson 2011). This is no mutual sharing, no idealistic commons; Dodder-laurel can make life hard for some bushes and trees. However, like other local hemiparasites such as Mistletoe and Cherry Ballart, it doesn't take from its hosts in an unrestrained manner, but is equipped to coordinate water and nutrient needs with its hosts. Research on Dodder-laurel's non-biological twin *Cuscuta* species suggests that its attachments are not arbitrary, but chosen (In Defense of Plants 2015). It can sense plants nearby and through its feeler can detect whether the plant has sufficient nutrients to act as a worthwhile host. Dodder chooses only connections that matter, ones that have an impact (Leiff 2014).

The Western notion of the parasite as bad has focused scientific research (what little there is), and popular reactions, on identifying the effects (assumed detrimental) of the parasite on the host. Birds, forest ecology and Indigenous people have a different story to tell. Mistletoe, and the other local hemiparasites, Cherry Ballart and Dodder-laurel, produce tasty edible fruits. The small sweet swellings of the Cherry Ballart, the green fragrant berries of the Dodder-laurel and the red fruits of Mistletoe highlight the alchemy of things—how one set of hemiparasitic plants can convert and transform the energy of gum trees and shrubs into sweet edible delights for humans, birds and animals. The two plants (host and parasite) together make something that neither could do alone. Indigenous Australians use Mistletoe as a food source and use the leaves for traditional remedies (Watson 2011). The name 'snotty gobble' for Dodder-laurel derives from the mucus-like feel of the berries in the mouth.

Dodder befuddles the beginnings and ends of things, instead entwining unlike species in a facilitative meshwork. Dodder, like other hemiparasites, has an order of its own and knows its place in the forest. It re/assembles bush life in a different manner and makes its own belongings. It lives by a different imperative and rhythm than the surrounding plants, and at the same time, it joins with those plants as an integral part of bush life. Dodder-laurel shows the possibilities of other ways of life, other ways of making worlds.

## Disruptive agencies

Indigenous people know about parasitic plants in this region. As Dja Dja Wurrung elder Auntie Julie McHale says, 'we see this [Cherry Ballart] as a sacred tree, or sacred leaves, because the little tree has to attach to a big tree. It's like children have to be taught, or helped, or looked after by adults. It represents community in that you've got to work together' (ABC 2020). At the beginning of Auntie Julie's plant and cooking course, participants take part in a traditional Aboriginal smoking ceremony. Three plants are individually placed on the fire to create smoke and meaning. Participants take off their shoes to attach themselves more fully to the earth and move closer to the fire to scoop smoke across their bodies in a performance of cleansing and connection. The last plant added to the fire is Cherry Ballart. It is placed on the fire to signal co-operation.<sup>3</sup> It is in that smoky moment by the fire that settler understandings of the bush are upended and a completely different understanding offers itself. It is a moment of radical disarticulation after which things can never be the same again.

The Dja Dja Wurrung people categorise parasites like Cherry Ballart along different lines to Western thinking; they see community where settlers see encumbrance. Classification is always within a system of thought, a way of being, a way of thinking, that not only labels difference, but also makes difference at the same time. Classification is not passive, but an active event of shaping the world one way and not another (Bowker and Star 2000). Classification does not merely describe what is 'out there,' but, as Bowker and Star note, 'Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another.' 'Classifications are powerful technologies. Embedded in working infrastructures they become relatively invisible without losing any of that power' (2000, 5, 319).

The classificatory force of the term 'parasite' is part of a cultural mindset that functions as a sort of 'plant blindness' where plants are 'seen' and related to through a Western cultural lens. Local plant parasites bring a queer sensibility to critical plants studies by disrupting the normative notion of a plant as a discrete entity with roots, leaves and branches. Plant parasites 'queery' what is a 'proper' and desirable plant, they 'queery' what sort of planty bodies matter and which ones deserve attention and care. They disrupt notions of the individual entity and insist on a more collectivist notion reminding us that what constitutes a plant is always situated in broader ecological and historical contexts. The multiplicity and boundary-blurring of the queer performativity of parasites is echoed in Rebecca Giggs's exploration of whale parasites. Whalesuckers, whale worms, whale lice are so entangled with the whale itself that she suggests that the whale body could be seen as an incubator or a zoo. Giggs wonders at the dependency of parasites, a group of beings that are not independent entities and that appear to live counter to the ideal of the harmony of nature. The whale body as multiple, she says, 'housed many different ways of being alive, which might have been somewhat magical, if it weren't also so spooky. If we could learn from the parasites that everything is *not* quite itself, and it never was—that there is deathliness and irascible vigour, and plurality and plunder, pushing and pulsing within each creature—then we might undo the charms of charisma and expand the boundaries of our care' (2000, 305). As Haraway states, 'no species is ever One; to be a species is to be constitutively a crowd, in symbiogenetic naturecultures, with no stopping point. [...] species is about the dance linking kin and kind' (2016, xxiii).

For Eve Sedgwick, the 'word "queer" means *across*,' in the sense of traversing, twisting, eddying, recurring and multiply transitive (1993, xii). As well, it can refer to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' (8). In a sense Dodder-laurel materializes this notion of across-ness with its joining of multiple species and twisting, traversing habits. The connections it makes refuse the ideal of the independent plant body and unsettle the conventional script of the host and parasite as separate and as morally and biologically in opposition.

The performative quality of 'queer' is useful also in understanding human-nature interactions as embodied articulations. The queer possibilities of the bush offer a non-nostalgic encounter of being simultaneously in-place and out-of-place in Australian nature. Queer, understood as the 'multiple criss-crossing of definitional lines' can thus be brought to bear in the postcolonial landscape to do 'a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state' (Sedgwick 1993, 9). Queer theorists understand all too well the complex and interwoven implications of definitions of natural/unnatural for survival, identity, and belonging. Seymour argues that 'the environment can function as a site not just for *establishing* such constructs [of race, class, nation and gender] but for *challenging* them' (2013, 2, emphasis in original).

What happens when hemiparasites shrug off the negative baggage of the parasite as freeloader? What happens when such plants are instead materialised as part of a facilitative or coordinating network, as plants that are nurtured and given existence through the generosity and assistance of other plants? What happens when a community level relational perspective replaces a focus on the individual in isolation? What happens when consumption is refigured as non-destructive? Not the arrow with only one direction, not the abuse value of a relation without exchange, no more baddies and goodies, no more nice and nasty, no more host and hanger-on (Wolfe 2007). As Paxson advises (in relation to microbes), it is problematic to make any absolute distinctions between 'good' and 'bad,' instead, she argues, we should evaluate our companion species on the basis of 'situated effects and contingent actions' (Paxson [2014] in Kirksey 2019, 208).

Queer(y)ing the category of plant parasites re-worlds our locality—plants, humans, animals, others. Our local bush is now a stranger, more interesting, more differentiated companion. Queer worlding (Haraway 2008) offers a strategy to reconceptualise our relationship with nature beyond dualism and the received settler-colonial script. Both Indigenous understandings and queer performativity offer pathways for finding respectful ways of relating to, and seeking modes of reciprocity with, all plants, but especially parasitic plants such as dodder.

These perspectives and the experience of meeting dodder have taught us to slow down and pay attention in new ways. Rather than reacting negatively to our local plant parasites we feel enriched by our encounters with them. Their difference to the usual arboreal tale of the forest and their strategies of mimicry, of forging a life without roots, add diversity and different life-stories. Like them we feel differently attached in this place, where we belong and don't belong at the same time.

## Holding Hands in quiet resistance

The mistletoe speaks to them as they walk the bush path. The mistletoe, its shrubby top and pendulous weeping branches below, remind them of the back of a head of long hair, round at the top and cascading down in long tresses that sway in the breeze. They imagine the host tree waking in the morning and shaking out its many green leafy heads-of-hair as it prepares for the day. It rumours of vectors of movement, modes of attachment, strategies for settling in a place, finding ways of enriching it, co-becoming with the host trees and the forest community. The mistletoe appreciates their admiring glances (Instone 2018).



*Figure 4: Holding Hands (2018). (Image courtesy of the artist)*

The photograph *Holding Hands* has multiple narratives. The main protagonists in the image are two Indian men centrally positioned in the composition holding hands in the Australian bush and looking directly out of the picture plane at the viewer/camera. Holding hands can be seen as a gesture of love and desire; two hands coming together to confirm unity and connectedness. This clasping gesture is what it is, literally—but is also elusive and complex conceptually. This gesture has clearly been staged for the camera. So, in this context the clasping of hands certainly implies a form of community and solidarity, and even a form of quiet resistance.

The image should be plausible—yet it remains strange, as strange as images of early white settlers who attempted to bring (impose) Englishness, through dress codes and other socio-political behaviours and cultural attitudes to the Australian landscape, problematising further the Australian bush as a contested space. The area where this photograph was taken continues to be a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon community. There is little contemporary evidence of brown bodies in the landscape. Perhaps in this context, thinking optimistically, the image signals

opportunities for cohabitation and shared narratives between new migrants and the land, and between migrants, settler and Indigenous communities.

The Australian landscape and its inhabitants, both Indigenous and white settler, is documented in art and history, if in a somewhat chequered way. What this image attempts to do is bring another discourse into the space of the Australian bush—that of the contemporary Asian Australian migrant. Not as mimicry, but rather attempting to acknowledge their presence and validating their sense of belonging on their own terms, in their own dress codes and body language thereby resisting and challenging the logic and boundaries of Asian Australian identity politics, highlighting the ‘resilience and endurance of Asian Australian identities and their enormous contribution in the national imaginary-space to tell the “Australian” story...’ (Chakraborty & Pieris 2019, 5).

*Holding Hands* reminds us that migrants bring their own knowledges, cuisines and botanical relations to the table, further ‘queering’ the received conventions of settler colonial society. Encounters between Indigenous Australians and non-white Australians predate white invasion. Most notable was the trade relationships in northern Australia between the indigenous Yolngu people and the seafaring Makassans of Sulawesi. A web of trading links between Darwin and the Torres Strait Islands with Indonesia and China disrupts the narrative of Australia as an isolated country, ‘discovered’ by the British (Marks 2018). Stephenson (2001, 2003) argues that Indigenous and migrant histories, issues and narratives are partitioned in Australia. She argues that Aboriginal and Asian-Australian literary, cultural and in our case, plant and food interactions, play ‘an important role in “unearthing” the experiences of these communities themselves, highlighting the tensions and points of solidarity between them’ (2001, 55). Through such alliances, Indigenous and Asian Australians can ‘situate themselves and their knowledges in Australia, undermine white stereotypes, define themselves in their own terms, and empower their families and communities more generally’ (56). Stephenson calls for ‘a new national script that promotes greater understanding of the incorporation of migrants within, rather than after the history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples,’ in order to unleash ‘the emancipatory potential of such alliances’ (2003, 64).<sup>4</sup> Such a new national imaginary highlights the possibilities of creating new stories outside the white settler-colonial script.

As critical in the photograph is the backdrop of the Australian bush. Here indigenous plants, Grey Box eucalyptus and hemiparasitic Box Mistletoe coalesce, while introduced Blackberry forms an understory, framing the two protagonists, while the two protagonists also set the bush into new relief. The discourse around hemiparasites sheds light on the relationship of the Mistletoe and Dodder-laurel, and indeed on parasitic forms, which are often perceived as dangerous and negative, but which in fact challenge these assumptions asking us to consider instead the hospitality of provision and a shared sense of community and belonging. Furthermore, it sets up a conversation between different cultural forms—the Indian men (brown bodies) and Australian bush bits (green bodies)—both becoming differently and mutually constituting the space of inbetweenness.

*Holding Hands*  puts queer green and brown bodies into conversation. Both the plants—Mistletoe and Blackberry—and the humans refuse the dominant settler narrative of normal/natural. They riff on the expressions of weeding out, invasive, colonising, unwanted, and other terms used to denigrate one group against another. The parasite and the invasive plant disrupt the ‘native nature’ narrative rooted in the 1788 Australian origin tale, and the queer brown bodies point out that the ‘human’ in human-plant studies is multiple and differentiated, not the white, male, heteronormative body of settler discourse. The plants embrace and surround the brown bodies welcoming them and drawing them into a becoming that gestures at possibilities beyond the usual subject/object, foreground/background delineations. The Mistletoe and Blackberry speak about the tensions, struggles, desires and pleasures of what it means to belong. By questioning who and what belongs they challenge us to understand that belonging is not just about humans, but that the things we often think of as background, like plants and place, are active participants in what it is to belong. A kind of *belonging-with*. And at the same time, belonging makes things, makes us, makes communities and this place; it’s active, relational, messy, affective and always emergent, never complete. It’s a kind of non-kin coupling that ‘foreground[s] a desire that is flagrantly wayward and composing a deterritorialising rhizome, instead of a declaration of loyalty to family roots’ (Chisholm 2010, 380). Such a desire to forge non-kin couplings beyond the colonial inheritance of white settler Australia draws the two figures and their plant companions into performing an alternate tale of human/nonhuman active subjects making place differently. ‘It is precisely queer desire,’ notes Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, ‘that creates the experimental, co-adaptive, symbiotic, and non reproductive interspecies couplings that become evolution’ (2010, 39). The meeting of hands, the meeting of species, the meeting of native and non-native, the meeting of host and parasite, put at stake the question of how to inherit histories and how to get on together between and across species (Haraway 2008, 35).

Historically, the figure of the parasite has been a marker of society’s willingness to accept or reject otherness. Rather than describing a natural phenomenon of the nonhuman world, the concept of parasite was originally a social one, applied to people living off the hospitality of others (Gullestad 2012). Only later was it used in relation to plants, and later still in relation to animals and insects. The moral opprobrium of the original social concept influenced biologists to characterise plant parasites as ‘infecting’ the host, as damaging, unwanted pests open to elimination. The hidden power of categorisation also skewed scientific research toward studying the presumed negative effects of the parasite on the host, seeing host and parasite as separate rather than mutually constitutive. As a disrupter of the existing order, parasites provoke change along transverse lines, modifying both host and parasite to produce new (re)configurations. As Michel Serres notes: ‘The parasite is an exciter. Far from transforming a system, changing its nature, its form, its elements, its relations and its pathways the parasite makes it change states differentially. It inclines it. It makes the equilibrium of the energetic distribution fluctuate. It dopes it. It irritates it. It inflames it. Often this inclination has no effect. But it can produce gigantic ones by chain reactions or reproduction’ (2007,191). Far from being unnatural participants, pests or invaders, biologists now think about parasites as keystone species enhancing biodiversity, and as motors of evolution driving the continual renewal of life (Watson 2009). Gullestad notes that ‘scientists have for example come to the conclusion that a lack of parasites should not be understood as a sign of



health, but rather the opposite, pointing to a world out of balance. They have also stressed that being a successful parasite in fact involves a very high degree of specialization, as well as the ability to constantly modify your behaviour in order to adapt to an ever-changing habitat bent on your destruction' (2012).

The word parasite is derived from the Greek 'parasitos' meaning 'one who eats at the table of another.' The parasite might be an unwelcome guest, but it might also be a companion species in Haraway's terms of 'messmates at the table, breaking bread', queer kin together eating and being eaten, living and dying, comrades together (2008, 17 & 322). From a queer worlding perspective the local parasites find their place alongside other bush beings as vital, respected and necessary companions, collectively dining at the table forging a generous hospitality of provision.

### Not a conclusion, but an opening

Whether grasped two-by-two or tangle-by-tangle, attachment sites needed for meeting species redo everything they touch. The point is not to celebrate complexity but to become worldly and to respond (Haraway 2008, 41).

Living on the unceded lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung people is a privilege. Walking in this landscape has taught us much, revealing itself seasonally and making us attentive to the richness this place offers. Plant parasite agencies did indeed alert our curiosity and eventually ensnared us in their unfolding narratives, exposing how art and plants became intrinsically linked as we worked through collaborative processes of making, writing and reflecting. Our experiments with hemiparasites gave us permission to allow the writing to wander through and incorporate (a bit like the tendrils of dodder), dream state narratives and creative practice methods as legitimate ways of exploring meaning and our becoming-with place.

Our creative engagement with local hemiparasites, especially Dodder-laurel and Mistletoe, and our growing appreciation of Indigenous plant knowledges have moved and changed us in multiple ways, disrupting the order of things. The Dja Dja Wurrung offered a different way of understanding plant-plant and human-plant relations and exposed the particularity of Western botany and its classificatory apparatus. Parasites raised the question of who or what belongs. Dodder-laurel shared with us its own order, re/assembling bush life in a different manner to make its own belongings, while mistletoe opened up a different potentiality by demonstrating the hospitality of provision and re/distribution.

A queer perspective opened a field of possibilities of relations other than the Western plant parasite worthy/wicked dualism. The task of queer politics, says Elizabeth Grosz, is to 'embrace the openness, to welcome unknown readings, new claims, provocative analyses—to make things happen, to shift fixed positions, to transform our everyday expectations and habitual schemas' (1995, 174 in Mortimer-Sandilands and Erikson 2010, 37). Queer love, argues Kirksey, promotes a more complex form that disrupts the conventional notions of love, desire and empathy. 'Endosymbiotic love,' he says, 'involves ensembles of selves—associations of entangled agents

involved in relations of reciprocity and accountability, assemblages that can generate feelings of empathy and desire' (2019, 207). Pushing Kirksey's terms beyond the microbial, we could reframe our ongoing relationship with dodder as another variety of a queer 'interspecies love' story. It also makes us reconsider our love of this place beyond our anthropocentric notions and to embrace complex and 'more distant forms of affection' (200) that decentre the human.

These insights along with our embodied and experimental approach have given us an intensified awareness of the aliveness and variability of the local bush. The bush is no longer just a setting for our lives, but a queer presence making its own world in its own particular style. Dodder-laurel and the other hemiparasites have taught us to 'see' the forest anew. They have taught us to look more closely, to pay attention to the small things, and to be aware of the relations between things.

Now when we drive into town, we think about the clasp of the Dodder-laurel's tendrils as they choose us, ensnare us, and how dodder has utterly rearranged our trajectory. Planty parasites underlined the value of 'risky attachments' which 'are not so much about danger, but about possibility; the possibilities that emerge from acknowledging our entanglements in and with things. [...] But more than this, is the act of risking attachment, the active search for different and interconnected practices of feeling, thought, and action' (Instone 2015, 29–30). But of course, the intentions and trajectories of dodder remain necessarily limited from our point of view: we can only be moved and continue to be moved not as an end point but rather as an opening to more enlivened and entangled possibilities. Our responses may vary in accordance with our different colonial and migrant inheritances, but we share a new openness through which to become-with this place in a more respectful and accountable manner.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Parasitic plants obtain all or part of their nutritional requirements from another (host) plant. They attach to stems or roots of the host through a specialised structure called the haustorium. All three local parasites—Cherry ballart (*Exocarpos cupressiformus*), Dodder-laurel (*Cassytha melantha*), Mistletoe (*Amyema miquelii*)—contain chlorophyll and have some ability to photosynthesise to varying extents, hence they are classified as hemiparasites, although dodder is sometimes characterised as intermediate between a hemi and holoparasite. Cherry Ballart is a root parasite while Dodder-laurel and Mistletoe attach to stems. Hemiparasitism is a particular type of symbiotic relation between two species (different from commensalism and mutualism) where one plant benefits and the other suffers some level of detriment.

<sup>2</sup> The project *Becoming Differently* (2018) comprised four elements. In this paper, we focus on three works: a photograph (*Holding Hands*), an installation (*An Indian Spice table/dodder vine/haustorium/the dead hair of a cultural geographer/unidentified bird nests/collapsing form/eucalyptus branch/Swarovski crystals*) and an essay (*Entangled*). *Becoming Differently* was exhibited at The Substation, Newport, March 23–April 21, 2018, for the exhibition *Hyphenated* (2018), curated by Phuong Ngo and Tammy Wong Hulbert.

<sup>3</sup> The Wadawurrung (southern Victoria) also use Cherry Ballart in 'welcome to country' ceremonies. This gesture 'is a beautiful metaphor for visitors to Country who are being invited to share the resources of the land while caring for it as if it was their own. It is also a reminder of the importance of cooperation between people if all are to prosper' (Murphy 2021).

<sup>4</sup> A recent collaboration between a Chinese restaurant in New South Wales and a First Nations cultural education centre and land management service, Currie Country, is moving toward breaking down the dichotomy between

Indigenous peoples and Asian Australians. Together they are finding ways to share cultural knowledges through the production of food, highlighting the shared connections between Indigenous and Asian communities. Renee Ng, whose parents own the restaurant, says; 'There's definitely potential to continue telling this story that includes everyone. Everyone is involved in creating this story of our future together.' Arabella Douglas of Currie Country adds, 'It's all about everyone having a taste of what can be reimagined.' Both Douglas and Ng 'want their initiative to celebrate the historic Indigenous connections between Chinese, Indian and South Sea Islander communities in Australia.' 'The real story of Australia doesn't start in 1788,' Douglas says. 'We've got to stop seeing each other through a white perspective' (Lee 2021).

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## Biographies

*Down the Road Projects* (DtRP) is a collaborative duo consisting of an artist and a cultural geographer who live and work on the edge of the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park in central Victoria, Australia on unceded Dja Dja Wurrung country. Our research projects are pan-disciplinary and revolve around issues of place, identity, belonging and becoming.

Dr Lesley Instone is a cultural geographer whose work explores the material and embodied encounters and entanglements of humans and nonhumans in (mostly) Australian settler colonised lands. Her research experiments with different ways of paying attention and engaging performatively in the world and draws on a richly diverse theoretical landscape including science studies, feminism, postcolonialism, and more-than-human geographies. She has a particular interest in how affect, encounter and contingency shape relations, identities and worlds.

Rhett D'Costa was born in India and immigrated to Australia as a child with his family. His experiences as an Asian Australian inform his pan disciplinary art practice and research, from the use of colour to complex expressions of identity and belonging. These interests take into account shifting social and political circumstances and the tensions and consequences of mobility and migration in diverse environments. Rhett's artistic research examines the agency and role an artist as researcher can have within these often precarious and unstable spaces. In a career spanning thirty years in art practice and tertiary art education, his particular focus has centred around the Asia-Pacific region.

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