

Photo Essay

Performing the Limits of Home

By Karen Berger

This photo-essay is offered as a brief description of the rationale and content of the performance associated with my practice-led PhD in Performance Studies from Federation University, Australia, awarded in 2021. In keeping with the tone of a home-based performance, my language is somewhat colloquial, and theoretical considerations are not exhaustive. For a fuller consideration of my work please see ‘Performing the Bounds of Responsibility’ (2021), ‘Breaking Boundaries in the work of artist, Tracey Moffatt’ (2022), or the video of the performance (2021) from which the images are extracted.

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Some childhood memories associated with the limits of home remain with me. When we first arrived in Melbourne from England, my parents took us kids house-hunting. I remember visiting a potential house and my sisters and I knocking a sliding door off its hinges. We didn’t stay there. The house they did buy I was really keen on. The garden consisted of a big elm tree and dry grass. Being six, I was small enough that the grass reached above my eyes and so I thought the garden went on forever. I was really disappointed when fences went up to reveal a normal-sized garden. The elm was a winner though. I can remember the first time I climbed it high enough to be able to see over the surrounding fences. The bird’s-eye view of the land was intoxicating. And in my favourite childhood dream I could see even further: looking through the kitchen window I see the sky completely full of large swirling comets, planets, galaxies.

Searching for a theme for a Performance Studies PhD project, I come across Tim Flannery’s *The Explorers* (1998), an edited collection



Fig. 1: Using an excerpt from Tadeusz Kantor's *I Shall Never Return* (1988), I wake from a nightmare of Odysseus' brutal return to Ithaca.



Fig. 2: An excerpt from Jean Genet's *The Thief's Journal*, describing his illegal border crossing from Czechoslovakia to Poland, takes me out of the house through the window.

of journal excerpts by Australian explorers. There is something about the intimacy of reading a wide range of peoples' experiences with the challenges of a 'new' land, that fascinates me. I am aware that when I read the episodes that most intrigue me, my eyes move off the page into the space around me. As I unsuccessfully try to bridge the gap between past and present, reaching the limits of my abilities to really grasp what is going on draws me to further explore the material.

I am particularly struck by accounts of Indigenous peoples. First Fleeter, Captain Watkins Tench describes the gulf of understanding that existed between the Europeans and their guides: '[t]o comprehend the reasons which induce an Indian to perform many of his offices of life is difficult; to pronounce that which could lead him to wander amidst these dreary wilds baffles penetration' (qtd. in Flannery 64). In a fundamental sense, calling these new arrivals to Australia 'explorers', seen to be pushing their way across the limits of 'known territory', is an oxymoron: Indigenous people have been living here since time immemorial.

It seems to me that the best way to approach this controversial material would be to work on it with an Indigenous performer. I ask a colleague if she'll work with me. She agrees but we only manage a few workshop rehearsals before she finds she is no longer available. This places a significant limit on my plan. I defer for a year and eventually think I have found a way to deal theatrically with the explorers' journals in a productive way: I will perform the texts in my own home as if I were an explorer finding 'unexplored' lands. This performance of finding 'terra nullius' in my home will serve to show how absurd it was that 'explorers', and the colonial Government they served, could convince themselves that they were taking possession of an unclaimed land. I live in Narrm (Melbourne), home to the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation for at least 40,000 years, ancestral country that has never been ceded.

Richard Davis argues that a particular kind of limit, the frontier, 'is one of the most pervasive, evocative tropes underlying the production of [Australian] national identity' (Rose and Davis iii). My



Fig. 3: A Gunter's chain.



Fig. 4: The surveying 'ritual' accompanied by Ovid's quasi-religious lines.

site-specific performance aimed to give audiences multiple visceral experiences of limits, with my theoretical understanding primarily inspired by *Borderlands* (1987), by Chicana Mestiza activist, Gloria Anzaldúa. Walter Mignolo provides a useful theoretical summary of Anzaldúa's work:

Border thinking or theorizing emerged from and as a response to the violence (frontiers) of imperial/territorial epistemology and the rhetoric of modernity (and globalization) of salvation that continues to be implemented on the assumption of the inferiority or devilish intentions of the Other and, therefore, continues to justify oppression and exploitation as well as eradication of the difference. Border thinking is the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside; and as such, it is always a decolonial project (206).

In 'Epistemic Violence: the Hidden Injuries of Whiteness in Australian Postcolonising Borderlands' (2018), Goenpul scholar, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, highlights the fact that Anzaldúa recognises the importance of bodies (301). Moreton-Robinson asserts that Indigenous sovereignty struggles occur in the Australian borderlands as Indigenous bodies undermine the possibility of white Australian belonging (301). The epistemic violence that is the result of white efforts to maintain Australian social order 'continues in the everyday' (311). Both Moreton-Robinson's focus on the everyday, and her assertion of the importance of bodies feed into my home-based performative intervention, as performance is the art form that most engages with the body. In a site-specific performance, especially one where the audience walks between sites, the bodies of the audience members must engage more than in a traditional theatre.

Helena Grehan argues that Indigenous-themed performances, often staged at festivals and in mainstream theatres, can result in non-Indigenous audiences wanting 'to explain, to understand, to be



Fig. 5: From Caryl Churchill's play, *Top Girls* (1982), here I am Dull Gret, calling her neighbours to join her in descending to Hell to 'pay the devils out' for causing the Spanish to invade Flanders, resulting the in the murder of her children.



Figs. 6-9 (pp. 100-102): Nineteenth-century 'explorer', J.L. Stokes, is breathlessly excited by his 'discoveries'.

forgiven, or to escape' (30). By performing in my home I hope to resist this reaction, which is fundamentally one of seeing the Indigenous as 'other'. By overlaying the experience of being in a seemingly 'normal' suburban home with dense texts from a large range of times and places that demand intellectual and emotional work, I want to encourage an audience response that is more immediate and personal. My aim is to hinder the types of avoidance Grehan lists above for non-Indigenous audiences and elicit reflection on their own responsibilities for living on a stolen land.

Moreton-Robinson emphasises the performative nature of the colonial violence still enacted on Indigenous people: 'the first naval boat people produced invisible borders [...] that continue to deny Indigenous people our sovereign rights' ('Bodies'). She argues that these reiterative cultural practices are used to perform the idea of the nation as a 'white possession'. Historically, this was staged by men who used mapping and naming as integral aspects of colonisation. These men also ignored Indigenous performances of sovereignty, for example the threatening gestures, words, and spears thrown at Captain Cook when he landed at Botany Bay.

As Paul Carter points out, the explorers' journals themselves had a performative purpose, intended as an important tool of the imperial project, epistemologically claiming the land (71) by implying 'a centre of power round which the boundaries of the unknown are progressively pushed back' (64). It is for this reason that Carter regards the following excerpt from J. L. Stokes' journal as the *locus classicus* of Australian spatial history—the landscape itself is irrelevant, it is the explorer's experience, particularly his conscious enjoyment of language, that is important. As Carter shows, the explorer can make history twice, 'first by his journey and then by his journal' (117). This calls to mind Richard Schechner's oft-quoted definition of performance as 'twice-behaved behaviour' (36).



We stepped out over what we felt to be untrodden ground. It had often before been my lot to be placed in a similar position, and I have necessarily, therefore, given expression already to identical sentiments; but I cannot refrain from again reminding you how far inferior is the pleasure of perusing the descriptions of new lands, especially when attempted by an unskilled pen, to that which the explorer himself experiences. All are here on an equal footing; the most finished writer and the most imperfect scribbler are on the same level; they are equally capable of the exquisite enjoyment of discovery, they are equally susceptible of the feelings of delight that gush upon the heart as every forward step discloses fresh prospects, and brings a still more new horizon, if I may so speak, to view. And it maybe added that, to the production of the emotions I allude to, beauty of landscape is scarcely necessary. We strain forward incited by curiosity, as eagerly over an untrodden heath, or untraversed desert, as through valleys of surpassing loveliness, and amid mountains of unexplored grandeur; or perhaps, I should say, more eagerly, for there is nothing on which the mind can repose, nothing to tempt it to linger, nothing to divert the current of its thoughts. Onward we move, with expectation at its highest, led by the irresistible charm of novelty, almost panting with excitement, even when every step seems to add certainty to the conviction that all that is beyond resembles all that has been seen. (Stokes qtd. in Carter 82-83)



Fig. 10: Major Mitchell finds 'a land so inviting and still without inhabitants!'

In my performance, I enact the breathless excitement of this text as I drive my car out of my driveway and down our non-descript suburban street. In one of those serendipities that site-specific performance can sometimes provide, my street ends in a dead end where there is a house on whose garage door is painted a 1960s kitsch mural of hunting Aborigines—an extraordinary example of appropriation that would be considered utterly politically incorrect now (see fig. 9).

Major Thomas Mitchell was extremely influential in the progress of colonisation. Though his descriptions of the country were sometimes significantly inaccurate, it was these descriptions that attracted overlanders. From Portland to Sydney, so powerfully were his wheel marks seen to show the limit between good country and bad, that all squatters settled south of the line (Carter 255).

Mitchell and his men surveyed a large part of south-eastern Australian using a Gunter's chain (see fig. 3). Largely superseded by more advanced technology, there is a large collectors' market for such items. As one American website claims,

To surveyors and collectors alike, the link chain symbolizes a rugged era, when surveying tools and techniques were literally defining America. [...] Owning a link chain now captures a bit of this glorious past; to heft it enhances the kinship one feels with the surveyor who toiled in the field long ago. ('The Surveyor's Chain')

I bought (on eBay) a Gunter's chain, which I used twice in my performance—at first when enacting the quasi-religious lines of Ovid, quoted by Mitchell in his journal (see fig. 4):

Communemque prius ceu lumina solis et auras
Cautus humum longo signavit limite mensor

And the ground, which had hitherto been a common possession like the sunlight and the air
The careful surveyor now marked out with long-drawn boundary line. (Mitchell qtd. in Carter 119)



Fig. 11: But discarded under the house are less savoury remains.



Fig. 12: Harvesting the murnong.

Later in my performance, the chain is used to help physicalise the sorrows of a mother whose children have been killed by colonising forces (see fig. 5). Indeed, not only was the process of colonisation epistemologically violent in its imposition of a conception of land ownership, but thousands of Aboriginal people were murdered in raids and battles. In my performance I chose to refer to this aspect of colonisation through a number of found texts, and through the reveal of bloody napkins hidden under the house.¹

In his book *Dark Emu* (2014), Bruce Pascoe, a Professor of Indigenous Agriculture at the University of Melbourne, bemoans Mitchell's arrogance in assuming that Australia was a land just waiting for European farming. I use this Mitchell quotation taken from Pascoe as I enact confidently pushing through our garden gate (see fig. 10):

The view was exceedingly beautiful, shining fresh and green in the light of a fine morning. The scene was different from anything I had ever before witnessed either in New South Wales or elsewhere. A land so inviting and still without inhabitants! As I stood, the first European intruder on the sublime solitude of these verdant plains as yet untouched by flocks or herds, I felt conscious of being the harbinger of mighty changes; and that our steps would soon be followed by the men and the animals for which it seemed to have been prepared. (Mitchell qtd. in Pascoe 142)

But Pascoe is also grateful for Mitchell's observations showing that Aboriginal people built houses (21), and even more importantly, that they were farmers (20), which soundly disproves the legal fiction of 'terra nullius'—that the land was 'nobody's land' because it had not been cultivated. In south-eastern Australia, where I live, the cultivated food plant that Mitchell refers to as most prevalent is murnong, or yam

¹ For a fuller discussion of the attempted Aboriginal genocide, which falls beyond the remit of this short piece, please see my paper 'Performing the Bounds of Responsibility' (2021).

daisy (23). Sadly, it did not take long, with the combination of settlers' sheep over-eating the plants and their hooves hardening the soil, for the murnong to become rare (24). Inspired by Pascoe, I have planted murnong in my garden. Towards the end of my performance (fig. 12), I break the soil to dig up the first of my murnong to share with my audience.

Artist and historian Rachel Joy shows that many 'occupier Australians' refuse responsibility for the wrongs of colonialism by claiming that they didn't personally commit any crimes (140). However, this idea is based on the false understanding that colonialism is over. Rather, as stated by anthropologist Patrick Wolfe, '[i]nvasion is not an event relegated to the past but a structure' (Wolfe 140).

Or in the words of Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker):

Let no one say the past is dead
The past is all about us and within (93).

This research was important to me as a way of exploring the borders, or limits, to my knowledge, to how far I can go, as a non-Indigenous person, in my explorations of the land of Australia. I tried to follow historian Greg Dening's injunction: '[d]are to voyage across times, cultures and self' to expand your self-awareness and receive some understanding of the otherness within you (346). By creating a solo performance, in which I used text from many different sources, including various explorers' journals, I brought material from many voyages and times into myself. Aware of my limits, I searched for othernesses within me as my own home became porous to the cultural productions of different times and places. My aim was to deepen my own and a settler audience's understandings of the complexities of relationships to this land in order to foster our sense of responsibility, within the limits of our own subject position and history. With my artwork, by performing the feeling of having crossed a boundary into my own home, I aimed to raise questions rather than offer conclusions.

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