

Creative relationalities: A more-than-human approach to basket weaving

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Abstract

As an artist-researcher of Irish and New Zealand descent living and making on the unceded lands of the Wodi Wodi and Dharawal people, I consider how a more-than-human approach to basket weaving can shift my art-based research from a human-centric western view into a site of creative relationalities. I attempt to weave my way into a relationship with Country by applying a more-than-human approach as a way of learning how to live relationally and nurture my responsibility to care for Country.¹ In this paper I will discuss the process of applying Lauren Tynan's (2020) method of 'research as relation' and 'thesis as kin', to 'making as kin', weaving stories and lessons into an art project. Secondly, I will reframe 'the basket' (noun), 'to basket on' (verb) focusing on process, making with more-than-human and the counter narratives that interplay with bodies, matter, and deep time. Finally, I will take a nuanced approach as a non-Indigenous artist to a socially engaged art project, *Sheoak, Heoak, Theyoak* (2023), where 'making as kin' occurs on and with a crevice community of Casuarina trees on Country.

Introduction

It's mid-morning and I'm lured into my lounge chair flooded in winter sun. It's perched in front of a large north facing window holding the view of the escarpment, the Thirroul woodlands and Illawarra coast. I settle in, swapping my coffee on the side table for a bundle of preloved wool felt and wool yarn. Can the landscape be woven into a basket? Can I stitch myself in? Can we make together, bending with each other into a relationship? I'm weaving without rules, making without borders, it's low tech, low risk, it's crafty and fun, it can all be unspun. Making has always been my refuge and I wonder how making with a view will translate into form? Will I make with the landscape through my field of view, absorbing its energy into my creative consciousness and letting it bend my lines, or will the finished object stand as a hylomorphic

¹ Country with a capital 'C', acknowledging Indigenous relational connections, and responsibilities of care.

mode of creation, made by the artist, imposed onto the landscape? Tim Ingold (2010), argues against the hylomorphic mode of creation and suggests practitioners intervene into these fields of force, and allow materials to generate new pathways. Ingold's essay, *Textility of Making*, reads creativity forwards, as an improvised rhythmic movement, something that I itinerantly know as a maker (Ingold, 2010). After a few minutes I have stitched myself in, hand and heart nudging my brain into a transitional space where it feels lighter and more flexible, leaving the door open for my subconscious to slip in. The subtle activity of weaving changes my feelings and perceptions, body and basket become congruent with mind and landscape. The domestic space dissolves. The view is boundless in prospect, but it's not in opposition to my refuge (Appleton, 1984). The landscape and the basket are not binary, they are of and with and one.

*Hands, yarn, landscape
Inside, outside, otherwise
Gather, trap, protect*

Image 1: Interior Basket #1, 2023, Janine Bailey, wool felt, wool yarn 10 x 9 x 10cm.



Image 2: Interior Basket #2, 2023, Janine Bailey, wool felt, wool yarn 17 x 10 x 10cm.



Making with more-than-human bricolage

Like many artists, making can be an intimate process of care and collaboration, it can be a relationship between the maker and the materials, it can generate new ways of thinking. Basket weaving has a global history and connects humans and the more-than-human world in artistic expression, physical relationships, and knowledge. It is loaded with metaphors and easy to make with materials at hand, weaving has a way of embedding intangible stories (Kimmerer, 2013; Kimmerer, 2020; Parkes, 2005; Twemlow, 2020). I was taught to weave by local artist Melinda Young, a friend living and working on Dharawal Country. After a few weaving lessons, it became apparent that the weaving process was dynamic and flexible, it reflected my geographies of making across craft, research, and art. *Interior Basket #1 & #2* (2023) are baskets woven in the domestic space shortly after a lesson with Melinda, they laid the foundation for my journey into this project *Sheoak, Heoak, Theyoak* (2023). It connected me to Jane Bennett's (2010) theory of vibrant matter, and my embodied memories of walking through a local Casuarina² forest in previous years. It brought me into conversation with the more-than-human and sparked

² Casuarina glauca, commonly known as swamp she-oak.

an idea. The idea developed into a dialogue, raising questions about a more-than-human approach and the possibilities of creative relationalities.

Through this paper, I invite you to join me in a socially engaged art project called *Sheoak, Heoak, Theyoak* (2023). The project is not about contemporary basket weaving or gender, rather, its core focus is about the process of making in relationship with Country. It takes place in a Casuarina forest, a crevice community defined by the MERE Project of Antioch University of England ‘as a small pocket of vegetation uniquely adapted to thrive in harsh conditions’ (MERE, 2007). This Casuarina forest is thriving in a swampy area, hemmed in by weeds and a residential housing estate. It is a crevice of possibilities, where stories are woven into baskets with a more-than-human bricolage. As the reader you can participate in your own way, through observation, thinking or making. Throughout the paper we will contemplate a question: How can a more-than-human approach to basket weaving develop understanding of ways to make in relationship with Country? The project includes: myself as the artist and writer, the audience as reader and participant, wool felt and yarn, a more-than-human crevice community of bricolage and Dharawal Country. We are co-authors in this project, momentarily putting conventional notions of individual artistic concepts, both in terms of self-expression and subject matter aside—we make together.

‘The more-than-human world’, a term developed by David Abram in 1996, has been gradually adopted by theorists, scholars and activists to discuss the relationships between humans and non-humans (Abram, 1996, 2013). More-than-human refers to animals, plants, bacteria, and geography, and how they come together to influence our daily lives and other complex processes and systems that interact with each other (Ballamingie & Szanto, 2022, p. 283). If I think of all these elements as species in relationship, moving about within various ecosystems, it starts to shift my human centric view into a deeper engagement with Country and how entangled and dependant our lives are.

Applying a more-than-human approach to basket weaving on Country extends my art practice by generating conversations about reciprocity, care and collaboration. As a non-Indigenous artist weaving a coil basket exemplifies the process of learning how to be in relationship with Country, each layer building on the last one, making with hand and heart, building the inside, outside, otherwise. It is a living dialogue between past and present. Interlacing ideas, materials, thoughts, and conversations, one stitch at a time.

The *Sheoak, Heoak, Theyoak* (2023) project raises questions about blending western and Indigenous perspectives, and what can be learnt through a creative process that focuses on relationships. Indigenous scholar Lauren Tynan (2021) claims that relationality is learnt from stories, watching elders yarn, and being on Country. Tynan weaves her stories and lessons from Country into research and challenges her readers to be more relational in their processes. As a trawlulwuy woman of tebrakunna country, she treats research and writing as kin and emphasises relationalities as a practice bound by responsibilities with kin and Country (Tynan, 2020). The idea of learning from Country is echoed by Anthony McKnight (2016), an Awabakal, Gumaroi, Yuin man and senior lecturer at the University of Wollongong, who argues that learning should occur *on* and *with* Country. At conscious community yarns on campus, Anthony begins to teach me how to learn from Country by applying the Yuin method of look, listen and see (McKnight, 2023). I lean into relationality with respect and hope as an artist and person

living and making on Dharawal Country I can improve my relationships through this process. This is my first attempt applying Tynan's method and Anthony's teaching to my art-based research. I do not want to appropriate Indigenous methodologies but rather learn how to care and respect Country.

Sheoak, Heoak, Theyoak (2023), takes place in a Casuarina (swamp/sheoak) community 73km south of Sydney in the Australian state of New South Wales. The Wodi Wodi people are the First Nations custodians of this community nestled between the mountains and the sea in a small coastal town called Thirroul, established by the colony in 1860. This Sheoak community lives in a crevice — to access it by foot, descend 300 metres down the Illawarra escarpment, via the Bulli pass, past the Cabbage tree palms,³ walk across Lawrence Hargrave Drive towards Brickworks Avenue, over the railway bridge, turn left, and locate a dirt track at the eastern end of Kilncar Crescent. Step into the crevice by making a conscious decision to leave the chatter of western knowledge behind and tune into Country. Focus on the sound of the waves crashing in the distance, the Fairy Wrens twilling in the bushes, and Whipbirds cracking at your heels. Let the desire lines lure you into the unknown. Bend with the Leptospermums⁴ till you find yourself at a Casuarina forest wedged between Woodlands and Hewitts Creeks. This more-than-human ecosystem lives a few metres above sea level, hidden within a larger diverse community of temperate rainforest, woodlands and coastal flora and fauna created between 225-280 million years ago. The traditional custodians arrived thousands of years ago and hold the dreaming story about Gurangaty, a fish with an eel tail who created the creeks and rivers in the Illawarra (Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation, 2018; Organ & Speechley, 1997). The land is ancient — imagine how it feels between your toes, embrace the matted foliage on the forest floor, a community welcome mat spun from fallen branchlets and stories from the past and present. Here in this mazy place we can find a narrative that will weave us together in relationship with Country.

*A basket occupies an undetermined space
Full, half full, empty, half empty
Woven together in a state of becoming,
it lingers as an adjective in a continual cycle of purpose
Gather, trap, protect, hold
An object that appears resolved in its own contradictories
Inside, outside, otherwise*

³ Cabbage palm, *Livistona australis*, commonly known as Cabbage tree palm.

⁴ *Leptospermum laevigatum*, commonly known as Coast tea tree.

Image 3: Weaving with Casuarinas in the crevice community (2023). Dharawal Country, Janine Bailey, wool yarn, twine.



Fore ground, back ground, middle ground

Trained in printmaking and sculpture, I have recently been working relationally from a western perspective. Relational aesthetics is a term created by curator Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s and used to describe art based on, or inspired by human relations and their social context (Bishop, 2012, 2023). Incorporating my visual art skills with relational aesthetics I create participatory art installations by putting relations up front, building a narrative around community and collaboration. I still consider the process and the object essential parts of my practice, and, it is important to include these in this project, because they can be the site of original investigation and gaining new knowledge (Candy, 2006). I will be experimenting with Tynan's (2020, 2021) method of living relationally with her research, by expanding the term relational aesthetics to relationality aesthetics, because in this making and writing project I am in relationship with more-than-human and Country.

Indigenous scholars, friends, and teachers have shared their knowledge of Country, and I feel inspired to embrace Indigenous methodologies and ontologies in my art based research (Arnold et al., 2021, 2023; Bartlett et al., 2012; Bawaka Country et al., 2016; McKnight, 2016, 2023; Tynan, 2020, 2021; Wright et al., 2012). This project *Sheoak, Heoak, Theyoak* (2023) exists in relationship to recent socially engaged art projects that form part of my doctoral studies at the University of Wollongong which are funded through a government scholarship program. My arts-based research is focused on sustainable art practices through care and collaboration. Tynan decided to undertake doctoral studies to increase relatedness, and she situates the concept of more-than-human within an Indigenous paradigm narrated by Indigenous writers. One of her aims is to disrupt the 'author-ity' of her doctoral thesis (2020, p. 164). In response to the 'thesis as kin' method, I aim to discuss more-than-human and Indigenous methodologies through creative relationalities, where relationships, care and knowledge are woven into the baskets, threaded into sentences, layered into thoughts. The baskets act like a lens bringing into focus my relationship with Country past and present, where Country grew me up on the Tucoerah/Georges River on Bidjigal Country/ Lugarno, teaching me through sandstone boulders, twisty angophoras, and oystered covered mudflats. Gadigal, Wodi Wodi, Dharawal and Yuin Country have been generous adult teachers, folding me in slowly to the concept of relationality.

As an artist/researcher, I look to Lucas Ihlein, Melinda Young, Leanne Thompson, Suzanne Lacy, Megan Cope and Jane Bamford, artists who collaborate with scientists, geographers, farmers and community groups—they inspire me to move my practice beyond the studio into unknown spaces (Bamford, 2023; Curtis, 2020; Gonzales et al., 2018; Higgins, 2022; Ihlein et al., 2018; Young, 2020). Here, through their projects and mine, I have developed an understanding of how I can build relationships with diverse communities and find new ways of knowing, being, and making. For example, I collaborated with human and more-than-human participants within Bushcare communities and the Wollongong Botanic Gardens, specifically via the *Conservatory of Care* (Bailey, 2022) and *Conversations with Trees* (Bailey, 2023), two socially engaged art projects that blended artist residencies, sculpture, drawing, and workshops. I designed the projects to cultivate slower relationships with humans and non-humans, with the aim of continuing the relationships beyond the project. These are substantial bodies of work because they transformed my artistic practice and continue to serve as a foundation for

cultivating new perspectives. They have been instrumental in shaping this project. However, *Sheoak, Heoak, Theyoak* (2023) is the first time I have directly engaged with Indigenous relationality with the purpose of intentionally being in relationship with Country. I am making in a local Casuarina forest a small crevice community — not expecting answers, but seeking relationships. These relationships are dynamic, partly about making and learning, but mostly about unravelling, and revealing.

Community is a loaded word, defined and debated by scholars, social workers and groups of people sharing common interests, like my dog walking group that meets in an ad hoc fashion not far from the crevice community at Macauley's beach⁵ in the mornings. Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft are perhaps too dichotomizing to define this crevice community in a post-human, post-covid, post-colonial place (Bradshaw, 2008). Crevices are worlds within worlds, in the same way that communities are communities within communities. This crevice community has been growing and unfolding over several years. We have been walking ourselves into a relationship, slowly consenting to a dialogue that has shaped pathways and processes. We have been collaborators in art projects, where I gathered materials laid out like offerings at the base of your trunks and made monoprints and drawings. Through this making process we have grown, inside and outside. Our conversations have continued through changing seasons, blooming flowers, and rising flood waters. A year ago, I moved to the other side of the railroad tracks and my walking pattern changed. I stopped walking through you and started looking into you. I saw you from a different angle, buried inside a vista that took in the escarpment, woodlands and the coastline. It was the Heoaks⁶ that called me back, shimmering their elongated branchlets at dawn and waving bronzed tipped fingers in the afternoon. I began weaving in a domestic setting, drawing on my memories of Casuarina interactions and my time spent walking through you with my dog. But the distance between us didn't last and I left the comfort of my armchair for the comfort of the forest floor. Here, the making felt different, more thoughtful, more relaxed. I was making on and with, directly with more-than-human, nestled into place. The air was light, the light was soft, I felt sheltered and safe. It didn't matter what I was making, what we were making, it was about connecting, making in relationship to each other through care and respect. Yarn would dangle from my lap, attaching to branchlets and pollen, asking to be woven in. Our weaving was wonky and weathered, nothing was straight. On windy days we wandered into each other's thoughts, stretching yarn with time. Bending and kinking, swirling and whirling, trunks and limbs flexing together, singing in a cascading cantillate, spiralling inside, outside, otherwise.

⁵ Macauleys Beach, local dog walking beach, part of Sandon Point an important Aboriginal gathering place.

⁶ Heoak, a colloquial term for a male Sheoak specimen that bears no fruit.

Image 4: Sheoak trees in the crevice community, Female on left, male on right, Dharawal Country 2023.



Method, Process, Framework

My aim in this project and paper is to stretch Tynan's methodology of 'thesis as kin' to 'making as kin' and approach *Sheoak*, *Heoak*, *Theyoak* (2023) as *relationality* aesthetics. Reframing the art project into a relationship shifts the focus and makes it feel more collaborative and caring. According to Tynan (2020) 'thesis as kin' is a relational device based on Indigenous models of reciprocity and kinship. Tynan reframes her thesis as sister embracing the relationship in a process of nurturing and caretaking:

Come, I'd like to introduce you to someone. She is a relation of mine who holds and translates knowledge. She is committed to increasing relatedness. She started as a thesis, and now, through our processes of co-becoming (Bawaka Country including Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013), she is my sister; kin to be cared for who, in turn, will nurture me. (Tynan, 2020, p. 1)

Tynan conceptualises kin as a process, a sister she can grow with and take her research practice beyond capitalist production and neoliberalism. 'Making as kin' allows me to apply a care ethic, by caretaking my relations, by living a process of *relationality* aesthetics. As a non-Indigenous

person, I intentionally want to cultivate a respectful relationship with Country, and, I feel grateful to be invited to live relationally with research by conceptualising this process (Tynan, 2020, p. 1). Making as kin is a new concept, even though it is old, it is a different way for me to make art.

Engaging with Indigenous relationalities throughout my art practice feels precarious, but inside this fault line is a crevice of possibilities and finding new ways of making in an emergent space. I am committing to a process of co-becoming with Country (Bawaka Country & BURARRWANGA, 2016), and increasing relatedness, of grafting myself in, with the expectation of learning new knowledge and making mistakes along the way. To shift my process to ‘making as kin’, I apply what I know about the Yuin method of look, listen and see, taught to me by Anthony McKnight at recent Conscious Community Yarns (2023). Yarning is a relational methodology for transferring Indigenous knowledge, it is highly structured with protocols and principles, and provides participants control over the process and their stories (Barlo et al., 2020). My process is an informal type of yarning, weaving in my own way with wool yarn, wool felt and the more-than-human.

Image 4-6: Weaving in the crevice community, from left, female Sheoak, Blue flax lily and Casuarina canopy (2023).



Caretakers, caregivers—care considers diverse perspectives, ecological perspectives, so when a tick jumped on my leg I looked and listened. I put my weaving down and heard the Yellow-tailed cockatoos fly over my head, they were wailing me to move on. I stood up, brushed the tick off and looked for a new space to make with Country. I could see a fallen over Sheoak a few metres away. She was dying, making room for Coastal banksias and Blue flax lilies to grow. Like the tick she was also in the business of burying herself in. Sheoak was in a state of decay, her crimson flowers had faded to grey and her glossy green branchlets a dull brown. Her branches dropped like feathers, flicking the sunlight into my eyes. She looked vulnerable and exposed, making me feel awkward as I picked pieces from her limbs like a vulture. Sheoak had positioned herself on the ground, so the viewer became dominant, forcing me to acknowledge the damage of colonisation and

western perspectives. I walked and weaved, folding our perspectives in, contemplating a relationality aesthetic.

Image 7: Sheoak basket with female Sheoak (2023). Dharawal Country, Janine Bailey, wool felt, wool yarn, twine 100 x 150 x 140cm.



Human geographers Catherine Phillips and Leah Gibbs have developed an understanding of the more-than-human world by working in ‘the field’, a concept familiar to many artists and art

theorists. Phillips (2017) claims that a more-than-human approach is a meaningful way to think through encounters and experiences by investigating tangled fishing nets (ghost nets) on Yupangathi territory in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Australia. Her experiential engagements include encounters with Indigenous rangers as they collect abandoned nets from the beach. Each net holds marine debris along with an entangled story of its afterlife. Tracing these tangled oceanic journeys through historic strands of fishing, floating, entrapping and collecting, Phillips' opens up a more-than-human approach to relation-based research. Gibbs (2021) suggests encounters between humans and non-humans can be understood by deploying the concept of 'agency as a framework'. Agency, distributed or assembled, has the potential to shape and influence and embodied experiences can contribute to shaping new attitudes and actions.

Basket weaving provides the opportunities to apply a framework of agency and experiences encountered in 'the field'. The basket assembles these more-than-human encounters as relationality aesthetics. The coil acts like a linear timeline holding the basket in a circular frame, the wool yarn and felt traps my experiences, translating them into colours and patterns. The vertical and horizontal lines can be read like a map, locating key moments in the making as kin process.

Heoak is the name I gave to the basket made with a male sheoak. Heoak is about five metres tall and lives in the middle of the forest. There is nothing unusual or remarkable about this tree, he looks very similar to all the others. It was the space beneath him that called out to me, the unseen parts of a tree that holds a gentle slope. While I made Heoak, he held me in place. His interwoven roots had been weaving a basket long before I arrived. Our meetings would always begin with a little awkwardness, but a few breaths in we moved like a ghost net through the landscape, capturing fibres, flowers and threads that swirled around us, in us and underneath us. We detangled and re-tangled them into new relationships, assembling them into stories that could be read forward and backward. We built rings inside of each other, where only deep time could find them.

*Breathe in, breathe out,
Weave in, weave out
Hold space, make space,
In place, of place*

Image 8: Heoak basket with male Sheoak (2023). Dharawal Country, Janine Bailey, wool felt, wool yarn, twine 100 x 130 x 140cm.



The weaving was cathartic, I held the basket, and it held me. We made in place, moving in slow circular patterns, making our own path. Weaving in the more-than-human found in crevices, buried inside communities. We were empty vessels, semi functional sculptural forms. Making with fibres and foliage and bits of bricolage from critters past and present.

*Weaving with hand and heart
Slow start, slow art
Lost in the mazyiness we wake up inner fibres
Holding circle, holding time, holding on
New stories pile up on top of old
Taking place, being place, of place*

Image 9: Heoak and Sheoak baskets (2023). Dharawal Country, Janine Bailey, wool felt, wool yarn, twine.



The coil baskets made on and with the Casuarinas for the *Sheoak, Heoak, Theyoak* (2023) project are handmade from tapestry yarn, recycled wool felt, Casuarina offerings such as branchlets and flowers, and, other vibrant matter gathered from the crevice community. The tapestry wool is 100% virgin wool, 4ply, (4 strands twisted together to make 1 thread) and comes in skeins of 8 metres, or small bundles and strands. It is smooth non-divisible yarn, combed and twilled, soft and easy to work with. I source it from local charity stores, bundled in bags or as unfinished tapestry kits. The yarn has a distinct colour palette similar to colonial themed paintings and, surprisingly works well with the natural colours of the Casuarinas and the wool felt. The wool felt came from a Sydney warehouse, initially used for sustainable packaging, then given to me as part of a commission to make a life-sized merino sheep. I redeployed the leftovers into the Wollongong Botanic Gardens in my recent socially engaged art project *Conversations with Trees* (2023) wrapping the large sheets around turpentine trees and making free-standing sculptural vessels. Over several months the installation interacted with humans, non-humans and more-than-humans, changing colour and shape. After I removed the felt from the gardens I repurposed it again into the *Sheoak, Heoak, Theyoak* (2023) baskets, intertwining the more-than-human stories from past and present.

Conclusion

Sheoak, Heoak and Theyoak (2023) is an ongoing project, a creative relationship continuing to evolve. Theyoak is a basket in progress, woven with a Coastal She-oak. They are monoecious, meaning that male and female flowers are produced on the same tree. Basket weaving is soft and flexible, an excellent way to explore the complexity of embracing Indigenous methodologies as a non-Indigenous person. Tynan's (2020, p. 1) invitation to living relationality with research was easy to conceptualise through her 'thesis as kin' method, because it has a level of elasticity embedded into it, allowing it to be stretched into a socially engaged art project. Applying her method taught me how to make in relationship with more-than-human, whilst applying a care ethic to Country. 'Thesis as kin' complimented the Yuin method of look, listen and see. The project was a useful way to dwell in a more-than-human world, see Country through a different lens and find my own creative relationalities. I hope as a participant you got to do the same.

Epilogue

The Casuarina biome where this project takes place locked me into a weaving trance. We interlaced in the crevice, a corridor of propositions, where thoughts simmered in eddies and ideas popped up in the compost. Seeds were seasons deep, pollen predated place, and fungi forged it all together. In this mazy place I found a narrative that wove us together into a relationship with Country. Our fibres flickered together in the sunlight, reflecting our agency and reassembling itself into a provocation. Seeing agency equally dispatched caused it to exist in a time-lapse patchwork, inside, outside and otherwise. Weaving in crevices created crevices, spaces were undetermined, and we lingered in a state of co-becoming. We held and gathered, we swirled and whirled, we were safe, in a place, of a place, becoming place. When I wanted to go further into the crevice, I laid back, letting your branchlets cocoon me into a nest. I imagined myself as a pipi wiggling my way into the substratum floor. Here, buried in the crevice I could find new ways of knowing, how to make as kin, I could stitch myself into Country. Paired together we would weave a future together, in creative relationalities.

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