

## Towards Intimate Relations

### Gesture and Contact Between Plants and People

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The Christmas Tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*) is a small tree that flowers brilliantly in yellow-orange in the middle of December and only grows in the Southwest corner of Western Australia. It is the world's largest parasitic plant and one of the first Australian flowers recorded by the crew of the Dutch vessel *Gulden Zeepaert* in the early seventeenth century. For the Nyoongar, the Aboriginal people of the Southwest, the Christmas Tree is the final resting place of the soul of the deceased before embarking to the afterlife. Although spiritually significant, the Christmas Tree has also been used as a food. Writing in the 1880s, Ethel Hassell reported that *Nuytsia* root was eaten like candy: "[Aboriginal people gave me] one of the roots to taste, telling me it was called *mungah*. The outer skin was pale yellow but easily stripped off leaving a most brittle centre tasting very like sugar candy".<sup>2</sup> As Hassell further relates, a ghoulish creature called a *gnolum*, in the form of a very tall and thin man enticed boys away by offering them *mungah* roots.<sup>3</sup>

#### Aesthesis and flora

Prompted by this vignette, I suggest two interrelated modes of appreciating plants such as *Nuytsia*: aesthetics and *aesthesis*. *Nuytsia*, as well as other flowering trees, shrubs and herbs, offer extraordinary images and embodied experiences. Since the late 1800s, the plants of the Southwest—kangaroo paws, wreath flowers, everlastings and other iconic species—have garnered international attention as the objects of wildflower tourism, a quintessentially aesthetic industry. However, the ancient Greek word *aesthesis* is the root of the modern term *aesthetics*. A recent revival of interest in *aesthesis* in cultural studies points to a renewed concern for sensation as the content of experience. As "embodied sense", *aesthesis* describes how we perceive the world through our bodies, through gesture towards and contact with more-than-humans.<sup>4</sup>

Such a shift away from pure visibility invigorates sensual experience in close relationship to the plant world. The concept offers the possibility of sense-rich connectivity. Appreciation of flora as *aesthesis* can complement the visual perception of plant images, prevalent in wildflower tourism as botanical desiderata: wildflower books, glossy websites and colourful camera snapshots, for instance. As we reach out gesturally to plants, appreciation is embedded in our sensuous movements, leading to intimate encounters of touch, taste, smell, sound and looking closely. *Aesthesis* closes distance through inhalation, absorption and mastication of plants, as I will later discuss in reference to the practices of eating bush tucker and using essential oils from indigenous plants.

*Aesthesis* is gestural contact in which the binary constructions of appreciation/sustenance, perception/experience, vision/sense heterogeneity and culture/nature interplay rather than diametrically clash. Embodied participation ensures that plants offer complex experiential enjoyment, but also physical, emotional and creative engagement that is both ancient and sensuous. An *aesthesis* provides a theoretical basis for approaching issues of life quality and ecosystem integrity, bringing plants and people into proximity. *Aesthesis* considers the human body in relation to flora.

Whereas visual appreciation alone may hold them at a distance, sensation invites plants into the bodily sphere where our bones and flesh interweave with the botanical world. Physical experience can invigorate curiosity, rapture, connectivity and wellbeing between plants and people. Attention is engendered by intimacy between human and botanical bodies, rather than by purely externalised points composing a plant into a scene or object. As an embodied and multisensorial aesthetics of plants, *floraesthesis* counterpoises the tendency we all share to aestheticise plants, that is, to speak of plants purely in terms of visual beauty or as comparable to objects of art. This kind of embodied connectivity between plants and people entails corporeal sense that can be marginalised in visual representations of plants, those which abound during wildflower season, for instance.

Dynamically an ancient yet forward-thinking mode of appreciation, *aesthesis* involves sense multiplicity. The locus of attention is within and between bodies. As perception assimilated to sensation, *floraesthesis* augments the visual appreciation of plants by theoretically articulating the bodily complexities between flora and people. The blooming phenomenon is entangled with human somatic realities and needs. An *aesthesis* of plants is sustained through seasonal, physically engaged and narrative awareness of sense experience. As such, perception becomes a dialogic exchange of substance between living beings. The "rational subject" (i.e. the human observer) and the "perceptual object" (i.e. the wildflower) are immersed in a field of sensation where subject/object binaries do not hold.

I suggest that *aesthesis* is a useful theoretical perspective for ameliorating long-standing conceptual divisions between human cultures and wild plants. A beautiful, but distant, Christmas Tree is seen separately from us whereas when we taste some of its pungent nectar, the tree becomes us. Sense as *aesthesis* is body-based rather than purely visually announced. In augmenting visual encounters, *floraesthesis* could be described as a corporeal aesthetics of plants. Cultural theorist Rod Giblett calls for a comparable multi-sensorial model of appreciation of the natural world that engages the body: "rather than appealing to aesthetics and so predominantly to the sense of sight, a conservation counter-aesthetic would appeal to all the senses".<sup>5</sup> An *aesthesis* of flora leads to sense contact with plants in an open and "meaningful perceptual whole".<sup>6</sup> A restoration of the senses towards perceptual wholeness entails embodied engagements between people and plants. As philosopher Warwick Mules suggests, *aesthesis* offers the substance through which creative engagement with the world can be based.<sup>7</sup>

## The senses

*Aesthesis* also opens us to the possibility of the senses beyond those that are conventionally accepted. For example, sense of place or topaesthesia is the experience of one's body within a place, inducing instances of memory, emotion and physical awareness of where we are. The environmental writer Rebecca Solnit characterises topaesthesia as the perception of space coupled to the invocation of memory.<sup>8</sup> Sensory experience of plants nurtures the formation of sense of a place as an embodied reality. This is especially resonant for the experience of the Southwest where the region's

particular tactile, olfactory, gustatory, visual and auditory qualities work together synergistically to produce a sense for being—and becoming—that is distinctive, that is bioregional.

Botanist Stephen Hopper has spent the last thirty years studying the flora and fauna of rock outcrops in the Australian Southwest, an area of global importance in which eighty per cent of the plants occur nowhere else on Earth. For Stephen, sense of place develops through the diligence of revisiting outcrops, recording information as words and pressed specimens, and noting impressions of places in field notebooks. Hopper suggests the nodes between memory, writing, flora and embodied sense of place through his “new form of journal taking”:

The written notes are the same as travel journals written by people in notebooks forever, but I combine that with these collections of plants and to me it's quite a compelling way of bringing me right back to the space and place of the rock outcrop.<sup>9</sup>

Hopper positions his work in the tradition of the travel journals of John Eyre, James Backhouse, James Drummond and May Vivienne, who all commented on the indigenous flora of the Southwest, albeit to varying degrees of attentiveness. Hopper's field notebook, however, combines written notes with dried specimens as both a scientific and expository instrument, bringing him “right back to the space and place”. At the crossroads of botany and art, Hopper's notebooks are “a combination of science and a bit of scrap-book art work”. His practice also demonstrates the diverse scales of sense of place—from a region, habitat or ecosystem to a rock outcrop—and the relatedness of sense of place and flora in scientific practice.

Another sense to consider is the internal sense of one's body occupying space. Michel Serres notes that coenesthesia can be known simply as “if I close my eyes, I have a sense of my own body”.<sup>10</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this sense as “the general sense or feeling of existence arising from the sum of bodily impressions, as distinct from the definite sensations of the special senses; the vital sense”.<sup>11</sup> A vital sense is the opposite of anaesthesia in which all the sensations of the body are nullified. Scholars observe that coenesthesia entered into usage in the 1800s when anaesthetics such as chloroform were introduced into the medical system. However, the term fell out of favour early in the twentieth century because “what has no organ—no identifiable structure—has no reality in Western medicine”.<sup>12</sup> Rather than located within an organ, this internal sense of one's body is associated with the metabolism or life-generating heat. Other scholars suggest that coenesthesia, as the sensation of our physiological body, has been considered an obscure form of perception because of “visual prejudice” in phenomenological research.<sup>13</sup> Coenesthesia imparts “physiological depth” to the body such that “without any regard for inner or outer limits, we incorporate the world”.<sup>14</sup> This form of bodily sense means that we are absorbed into our environments and that, conversely, our surrounds incorporate us. This differs greatly to *looking* at the flowering world only.

### **Mingled bodies**

The body senses offer a radically different conceptualisation of perception than we are used to. Usually, to perceive is to look; to have aesthetic experience is to see beauty. But these associations can be deepened by *aesthesis* as the sensation between bodies, induced in one body by another. Here, Serres employs the provocative term “mingled bodies” to describe multi-sensorial incorporation of bodies—human and more-than-human—and environments.<sup>15</sup> As another body sense, kinaesthesia articulates self-generated movements such as walking, leaping or turning in space. Proposed in the 1880s by the neurologist Henry Charlton Bastian, kinaesthesia is “the sensation of

movement of body and limbs relating to sensations originating in muscles, tendons and joints".<sup>16</sup> Like coenesthesia, kinaesthesia problematises the separation between senses and the uniform association of the senses to particular organs of perception, such as vision to the eyes. Material and spiritual interactions with plants as food, medicine, ornamentation, fibre or totems are characterised—and made possible—by gesture and contact through the diverse senses, as suggested by the stories of the Christmas Tree.

The sense of moving through plant communities by walking, running, crawling or bounding is a kind of kinaesthesia. Coordinator of the Ravensthorpe Wildflower Show in Western Australia, Merle Bennett, calls for the engagement of the sense of moving through the landscape in the appreciation of flora. When I asked her what mode of perception she felt is needed to come to know deeply the plants of the Fitzgerald River area between Albany and Esperance, Merle posed a response at the margin between flora and body movement:

On the whole, people need to stop and get out of their vehicles, to walk rather than to just expect to see the walls of everlastings that occur up north. On the whole, you don't get great masses of one thing flowering here.<sup>17</sup>

The need for physical appreciation is clear. The Fitzgerald River flora necessitates interactive walking, bending over or squatting down.

There is also the sense of the seasonal passage of time or what I choose to call *temporaesthesia*. This sense links temporal progressions to flora and indicates the relationship between time cycles and the sustained experience of plants in a place. Local conservationist David James has forged a significant long-standing sense for the flora of Anstey-Keane Damplands in southern Perth. His sense of place includes precise knowledge of where to locate species and when they will bloom. David synchronises his sense of place and time to the progression of the landscape and its flowering plants, including *Nuytsia*:

The peak of flowering is October. By Christmas Day, the Christmas Tree will flower as well. A lot of the flowering will be over, but there's still a few more to come. By January, when it's really hot, almost 99% of the flowers are gone. But come March, the Sand Plain Bottlebrush will be in flower.<sup>18</sup>

An aesthesis of plants engages the interdependencies between plants and people in a place, arising through the five senses but also through these kinds of bodily senses, such as *temporaesthesia*. As a model of sense multiplicity, *floraesthesia* assimilates perception to sensation in the Aristotelian mode towards visceral sense experience. Through the many senses in relation to one another, the body opens to what has been construed as the outside, the external environment, the inanimate landscape or a plant as a static element of a picturesque scene.

## Aboriginal seasonality

Aboriginal Education Officer Jason Barrow invokes the sense of the passage of time in his description of the plantings around the Kurongkurl Katitjin Indigenous Australian Education and Research Centre. As an educational garden, the planting demonstrates the intersections between flowers and broader patterns of movement and time. Jason describes the arrangement of three species named *balga* (*Xanthorrhoea presseii*), *mimidi* (*Xanthorrhoea brunonis*) and *mudja* (*Nuytsia floribunda*) for their cultural significance during the fire season or *birak*:

In conjunction with those six *balgas* around the two *Nuytsias*, we've got three other sorts, three individuals of a different species of *balga* called *mimidi*. They flower the same, but as a much skinnier or more slender flower. The *mimidi* is the drill for the fire lighting stick that goes down into the *balga borna*, which is the wood from the *balga*. The fire lighting kit is planted around those two trees that are flowering in *birak* season. That tells you it's the fire season.<sup>19</sup>

*Birak* is signified by the flowering of the *balga* and the *mimidi*, which together constitute a fire technology involving tactile sensations. The experience of drilling, the smell of smoke and the physical reception of warmth connect physicality and flora. As an expression of time movement linked to ecology, *birak* connects flowering to human wellbeing, and thereby departs from the Western concept of a season as fitting within specific calendrical dates regardless of surrounding ecological rhythms. The flowering cycles of the plants are etched in the traditional Nyoongar seasons:

You can tell the seasons by looking at the flowers. If something's flowering early, you know that's out of character when you know and understand the old ways.<sup>20</sup>

Subtle changes in flowering plants indicate broader climatic shifts and possible weather outcomes. As perception over time, Jason's kind of awareness encompasses cyclicity over the years, rather than the isolated instances of beauty of any one season or moment:

If flowers, particularly the yams, are flowering early, you know straight away you're going to have an early break to the season, nothing in the middle and rain at the end. Flowering gives you a perspective to observe larger patterns through the years.<sup>21</sup>

The succession of flowering points to larger significances between Southwest plants and Nyoongar cosmologies and Aboriginal ways of living. Traditionally, human and botanical ecologies of the Southwest region have been interdependent. For instance, when the flower of the common sheoak (*Allocasuarina fraseriana*) turned yellowish-brown, kangaroos were at their most corpulent and ready to hunt. Although not directly consumed, flowering interplays with the senses, marking ecological processes through time and the body. *Aesthesis* provides a framework for thinking about the complexities of bodily experience with respect to plants and time. To augment a focus on single species flowering, such as that often offered by botanical images, an *aesthesis* considers the succession of flowering between different species over various temporal and bodily dimensions.

## Wellbeing

*Aesthesis* is sensuous integration between plants and people. The concept furthermore has practical bearing in the Southwest in the context of health and healing. The wellbeing of people is linked symbiotically to the longevity of plants. Local Perth naturalist David James recognises the broader interrelation between botanical conservation efforts at Anstey-Keane Damplands and human psychological and physical health:

If every suburban town of Perth has a park which is appealing, you can walk there on a Saturday morning with a wild flower book, look at birds and animals. It's good to your body, it's good for your mind.<sup>22</sup>

As suggested by David, the experience of wildflowers imparts beneficial effects. Physical participation, in the form of walking and reaching outward towards plants, enables one to tap into the healing attributes of the bush.

Some Southwest plants have been consumed as roots, fruits, seeds, tubers and flowers by Aboriginal peoples for over fifty thousand years. The wildflowers that are gazed upon by international tourists today are the life blood of Aboriginal peoples. "Bush tucker" is the incorporation of plants into human bodies for sustenance and pleasure. Traditional bush tucker exemplifies *aesthesis* as a mode of interacting with plants through sensation. It reveals interdependencies, especially considering Aboriginal practices of firing the landscape to encourage the growth of food species.

During a walk around Banksia Farm in Mount Barker, banksia expert and proprietor of the farm Kevin Collins describes a fermented drink made from banksia flowers:

When they are open, flower heads can be immersed in a container of water, which might have been a soft craft wood or paper bark container, to make a nectar drink.<sup>23</sup>

For Collins, the multi-sensoriality of eating edible parts of banksia is a vital aspect of their appreciation. Eating adds a physical element to the educating of people about the specialised ecology of banksia:

So you put your fingers in, pull out a handful while you have them, chew them and you have sucked the nectar. Aboriginal peoples have done that. You can eat the seeds. They are delicious. Here you go. Usually we put a flame on them just to take the kernel off but just try chewing that.<sup>24</sup>

Sucking the nectar from the flowers and eating the seeds contributes a bodily sense for the interrelationships between plants and people. I suggest that this embodied sense, which earlier I theorised as *floraesthesia*, can expand scientific or visual modes of appreciating plant life.

The idea of *aesthesia* is also put into practice in some micro-industries that existed historically and have reappeared recently. A prime example is Mt. Romance, a small-scale industry near Albany that sustainably harvests native Australian sandalwood (*Santalum spicatum*) for processing into essential oil. Western Australia contains about 161 million hectares of Australian sandalwood, the most concentrated population of the tree in the world. Australian sandalwood was first distilled in 1875, but the export of unprocessed sandalwood to China as an incense wood for ceremonial purposes dates back to the 1840s. In 1916, the commercial extraction of sandalwood oil began, shortly before legislation was prompted in the 1920s, to control the harvesting of the wood. During this time, sandalwood oil was recognised in Europe and Asia as an herbal treatment for venereal diseases. With the introduction of antibiotics in the middle of the twentieth century, the production of Australian sandalwood oil ceased. In the 1990s, interest in sandalwood oil as a topical treatment for a wide range of skin conditions reignited the production of oil for cosmetics, fragrance and aromatherapy markets.<sup>25</sup>

An *aesthesia* of plants points to the potential for small-scale economies of plants through embodied appreciations. Yet, *aesthesia* also evokes human healing through botanical substances. For instance, aromatherapy involves the incorporation of plant-based essential oils into the body for therapeutic purposes through three pathways: ingestion, inhalation and absorption through the skin.<sup>26</sup> Similar to the Tea Tree, fragonia essential oil derived from *Agonis fragrans* is being cultivated near Harvey for aromatherapy. The smell has been described sensuously as “a pleasant fresh cineolic odour with a hint of a citrus note...mixed with a slight spicy cinnamon tonality and sweet balsamic undertones”.<sup>27</sup> Recent scientific analysis of fragonia suggests anti-microbial, anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving qualities.<sup>28</sup>

Another regional example further entails the shift to flowers as subtle substances for human healing. Aromatherapy or flower essence therapy is an example of mind-body integration insofar as physical ailments or conditions are first approached through psychological pathways induced by the wildflower essence. Vasudeva and Kadambii Barnao in *Australian Flower Essences for the 21st Century* compile the subtle qualities Southwest wildflowers possess as therapeutic essences.<sup>29</sup> Using a minute dosage, the wildflower is incorporated into the human body, rather than held at bay distantly. Wildflowers in this embodied sense are agents for alleviating human suffering. Flower essence therapy focuses on visual appearances, but the image bears upon the body. Through this modality of flower essences, vision is integrated to the senses. Flower essence therapy is yielding beneficial results in regional Southwest hospitals as a form

of complementary medicine. A study indicates the use of Western Australian bush essences in nine Perth area hospitals for stress and pain management, producing safe and consistent results without interfering with Western medical procedures.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

*Aesthesis* allows us to consider these engagements—eating, looking closely, touching, tasting, leaning towards and incorporating into the body fibres—with plants. Embodied appreciation and physical interaction hold promise in broadening the conceptualisation of plants as images. In addition to the extension of the eye over a brightly coloured landscape, gesture implies the reaching out towards plants through the intimacy of the proximal senses such as touch and the interest in what is underfoot as connected to what is afar. The concept points to the longevity and wellbeing of bodies, evidenced by traditions and emerging practices of bush tucker, essential oils and flower essences in combination with conservation consciousness.

I suggest that the botanical aesthetics of the future will necessarily consider the body as a complex field of engagement and move towards sensation. In times of rapid species loss, *aesthesis*, as part of a conservation ethos, has the potential to affect our appreciation of plants through bodily depth. I conclude here that intimacy begins with gestures of curiosity and the practice of inviting sense possibility into our encounters with flora. The apprehension of flower images, instead of the apogee of our perceptions of and interaction with the botanical world, can become a pathway for intimate sensory exploration. In the gestures of kneeling beside a flower, looking carefully, smelling inquisitively, tasting tentatively and listening expectantly, a more nuanced form of appreciation emerges, one which I believe differs radically from an aesthetics. These sense acts can be balanced and modified by ongoing exploration of established uses of plants—including flowers, seeds, roots, bark and exudates—in the context of regional spiritual and ecological cosmologies.

But we do need an informed and capable cohort of embodied educators. As Kevin Collins of Banksia Farm exemplifies, proprietors of tourism are often educators who hold the ability to catalyse embodied interactions for all, including new visitors and long-time residents alike, in biodiverse places like the Southwest. Jason Barrow of Kurongkurl Katitjin is an educator who engenders understandings of and appreciations for Aboriginal knowledges of flora, including the corporeal aspects of traditional fire craft. Indeed, the invocation of *aesthesis* in environmental education and cultural awareness underscores the role of experienced botanical educators and conservationists, such as Kevin and Jason. We require guidance in the traditions of *aesthesis* in order to make safe, conscientious and accurate decisions about how to interact with plants in such ways on a regular basis.

Beyond the Southwest, each region of Australia holds the promise of the senses. Most wild plants have cultural histories involving long-standing traditions based in the smells, tastes, textures and sounds of whole plants in complement to their often stunning flower displays. As Goody argues in *The Culture of Flowers*, physical interactions with flowers as ornamentation, perfume, food and medicine have characterised historical relationships between people and plants worldwide.<sup>31</sup> When we consider the multi-sensorial qualities and potentialities of plants, a depth of connections can be honed and restored. The model I have proposed, and which I have identified to be in practice in the Southwest already, expands the narrow view of flowers as visually pleasing towards the appreciation of flora as sensorially possible, open and rewarding.

## Notes

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22. David James, pers. comm., September 2009
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