

Ari Larissa Heinrich

Ejecta

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“This is not the correct history”:
Lacunae, Contested Narratives,
and Evidentiary Images from Sri
Lanka’s Civil War
M. Neelika Jayawardane

He Brought a Swastika
to the Summer of Love
William E. Jones

The Fern Rose Bibliography
Tan Lin

Racial Chain of Being:
The More Things Change,
The More Things Change
Shaka McGlotten

Ejecta

Ari Larissa Heinrich

Cookie Jar 1

The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant

Malibu

7

Volcano

8

On Rocks

20

Stumbling

37

Swells

43

Sale

48

Sediment

53

It was only as the last chapters of this book ran their fingers along the Black contours of this landscape of conquest in the Western Hemisphere that I felt compelled to look for a better organizing metaphor. . . . And like other authors in the final phases of their work, I found what I was looking for very close by. In some sense, I found it under my feet, in the very geography that my Blackness was now living on, creating on, and contending with.

—Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals*

Malibu

In October 2018, I was on a train from Poughkeepsie down to New York. I had just visited my father, whose health had been declining for some time. The following day I was due to visit the artist Jes Fan in Brooklyn to view his recent works in melanin: lush, liquescent globules of glass that Fan flushed through with plumes of pigment and suspended, like great droplets of dew, on scaffolds of wood and silicon. About an hour into the train ride, I got the call that my father had died. From my seat by the window, I felt a casque of air descend over my head. The cabin noise faded to a hum, and next to me I felt the jolt of a pressure front slamming to the floor, its aftershock vibrating up through the soles of my feet. Other than that, I felt nothing. I didn't cry, I didn't stand up, I didn't call anyone. Instead, I looked out the window at the dense northeastern forests. Somewhere beyond the trees, along the Hudson River, was the place I grew up. I checked the map on my phone, then looked back out the window. We were approaching Peekskill. According to the internet, it was in Peekskill one evening in 1992 that a mysterious twenty-six-pound object suddenly dropped out of the sky and smashed through the trunk of a red Chevy Malibu parked in a residential driveway. The Malibu wasn't worth much before the object totaled it, but afterward it tripled in value. The object was a meteorite, and the mangled car went on to be displayed in museums from New York to Paris.¹

7

Epigraph: Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), xiv.

1. "[O]n October 9, 1992 at approximately 7:50 pm EDT the 4.4 billion year old, 26 pound meteorite smashed through a red Chevy Malibu parked on a residential

It's 2020, and I'm back in my adoptive city of Melbourne, Australia. It's been more than a year and a half since my father died. Which means it's been more than a year and a half since I visited Jes Fan at Recess in Brooklyn. At Recess, Fan had been participating in what the gallery calls a "session": a two-month residency during which the artist's studio remains open to the public, rendering the creative process transparent to the audience at all times.² My own visit occurred relatively late into Fan's residency. So by the time I got there, Fan had already put a number of bits and pieces on display. In a corner near the entrance, for instance, he'd draped hides of silicon skin, in declarative keys of reddish brown, yellow, and black, while on the south wall, he'd mounted a compact nest of sculpted scapulae supported by a frame of pale-blue stalks. Nearby, the artist had arranged a row of ten plastic vials on a plain white shelf, each filled with a different solution of melanin, ranging in consistency and color from plasmatic yellow to a thick, sesame-paste pitch. But most striking of all were the elongated, orbicular stones of glass that Fan—who

driveway in Peekskill, New York—just north of New York City. After being slowed by earth's atmosphere to a terminal velocity of approximately 200 MPH, the Peekskill meteorite sliced through a car, narrowly missing the gas tank, and created a crater below the car as it finally came to rest. 18 year-old Michelle Knapp had just purchased the car for \$400 from her grandmother. . . . [The Malibu was eventually] acquired by the Macovich Collection of Meteorites in New York City, whose proprietor, Darryl Pitt, also controls the main mass of the Peekskill meteorite. Pitt was the first person to ever prepare and offer select meteorites for auction and is today the meteorite consultant for Christie's. . . . Today specimens of the meteorite itself sell for in excess of \$150/gram—nearly 4x its weight in gold." See <https://meteoritecar.com/history>.

2. "Jes Fan: Obscure Functions: Experiments in Decolonizing Melanin," Recess website, <https://www.recessart.org/jesfan/>.



Installation view, Jes Fan's open-studio exhibition *Obscure Functions: Experiments in Decolonizing Melanin*, Recess, Brooklyn, October 2018. Photo by Jes Fan

has a BFA in Glass from Rhode Island School of Design—had riddled with slicks of melanin and balanced on a large, sinewy scaffold of venous purple, tawny bone-brown, and muted pink. The structure sat centrally in the gallery space. Pity, I think from the great distance of my present Melbourne moment, that in my state of shock that day I didn't take more pictures of the back of Fan's studio at Recess—the hollow husks of broken vessels and half-filled forms, the fragments of silicon and paper and plaster, the primordial noise of rejects and experiments—because then I might have documented more fully the moment in Fan's dynamic practice when melanin began to move even more assertively from the role of art material to that of collaborator, a moment anticipating the artist's budding partnership with *Phycomyces* zygospores, a melanated mold with fine dark filaments that Fan would incubate in bulblike intervals in a vast habitrail of glass tubes installed at the Liverpool Biennial a year or so later.³

But here I am, finally returning to my research on Fan's melanin work—and wrestling with what it means to research melanin as an art medium. Every organic substance has a social life, I reflect; and though melanin's is uniquely overdetermined, its history, in my view, is not yet fully described. In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Jane Bennett observes that “[a] lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors, and once humans themselves are assessed not as autonyms but as vital materialities.”⁴ How—I struggle to grasp—*how* do you frame the materiality of melanin when it's mobilized as a medium of art?

3. See <https://liverpoolbiennial2021.com/artists/jes-fan/>.

4. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

City life in Melbourne in the winter of 2020 is bleak—a dead zone. In response to the emergence of Covid-19, the state government has instituted comprehensive lockdowns, strictly regulating when you can leave your home and where you are allowed to go: the doctor’s, the grocer’s, those places deemed essential. But during a brief window we are granted the luxury to visit nonessential shops. So one day, I make my way to Fitzroy, a trendy suburb in Melbourne’s northeast. Brunswick Street is normally bustling with cafés and hair salons and buskers and thrift stores, but today it’s quiet; though it’s only mid-afternoon, the stores are starting to close. I walk past an antique shop, but to my disappointment, it’s dark inside.

11

Taped to the shop window is a note with the owner’s cell number. “I’m here,” reads the note. “Call my mobile.”

I tent my fingers and peer through the glass at an assortment of reanimated industrial kits. What I see reminds me of the inventory you’d have found at Winchell’s Corners, an antique store my father ran in the Catskills in the 1970s. At my father’s shop, you could buy all sorts of seemingly unrelated objects: rocking chairs and porcelain dolls, foundry patterns and giant rolls of thick orange foil, wooden wardrobes that opened to emit toxic gusts of evaporated mothball perfume, as well as landscape paintings, tailor’s dummies, Bakelite bangles, and at one point, a heavily oxidized menorah, which we used in the house for a while. Over the course of my childhood, a range of preserved animal specimens also found their way into the shop: piglets, rattlesnakes, and frogs in jars; the occasional tired fox mounted inexpertly on a plank; and at least a sled’s worth of trophy stag heads. Dad also kept a plastic dollar jar near the register, filled with keychains made from “lucky” rabbit’s feet dyed unnatural shades of red, blue, and green. When I was six or seven,

my father acquired the head of what he swore was a woolly mammoth, stuffed and fixed to a cedar plinth. He prepared an index card and scotch-taped it to the front, arranging the display on a table in the center of the shop. “Be the first on your block,” he wrote. “\$500.”

12 I dial the number on the shop window and wait outside until a middle-aged man with long sandy hair, pulled back in a ponytail, appears in the window. I watch him put on a mask and unlock the door.

There must be some rule, universally acknowledged, that antique shops be crowded with stuff covered in dust. Unlike the almost willful eclecticism of my father’s space forty years ago, however, the shop on Brunswick Street picks a side: it features objects that bear some kind of relationship to science and technology. As soon as I step in the door, I spy a range of treasures: a rubber model leaf that looks just like a chew toy, labeled as property of a Sydney high school and dated 1962. A clutch of trilobites. A blue-tongued lizard in a jar; model teeth the size of milk cartons; an arpeggio of white-breasted wood swallows mounted on cast iron rods. The requisite suite of vintage gynecological tools.

In my father’s shop, you’d struggle to find a common thread linking the jumble of junk and jewels Dad collected from garage sales and trash bins and friends who’d fallen on hard times. But here, on Brunswick Street, I observe a distinct through-line, a quasi-narrative that locks the shop’s mixed cast of objects in a kind of existential contest over what counts as natural and what artificial. For instance, as soon as I enter the shop, I sense a tension between the taxidermy seagulls to the left (aka the things that are “real”) and the cement garden storks to the right (representations, aka “not real”). Just beyond the avian drama,

meanwhile, stand two banks of shelves in industrial steel. On one bank rests a motley orchestra of last-century laboratory vessels (beakers, boilers, funnels, and flasks), and on the other a succession of vintage world globes, each one rotated and labeled to highlight a different colonial cartography (North America, 1920s; Europe, 1930s and 40s; Australia, 1950s). Like a Scylla and Charybdis of science and settler colonialism, the two sets of shelves form a narrow channel that leads to the back of the store, and as I pass between them, my down coat snags briefly on the surface of Europe, making it spin. When I emerge on the other side, I find a third antagonistic pairing: a group of painted-plaster statues from the Nativity, its key figures arranged on top of a vintage glass display case in a huddle, the better to whisper about the row of naked anatomical models mounted on the wall behind them. In my foreground, Mary's hands part in the classic benediction, but both forefingers are missing, long since snapped off. Looking over Mary's shoulder, I see that one of the anatomical models embodies the later stages of pregnancy, its abdominal cavity open to reveal the fetus inside.

13

It's when I approach Mary to examine her fingers that I first notice the object. It lies at the base of her mantle. Roughly rhomboid, it's about as long and wide as a child's encyclopedia—maybe twenty centimeters long by forty centimeters wide by twenty centimeters deep. It's about thirty centimeters high at its peak. From where I stand, the object looks dense, substantial—as if as it were sculpted in the same thick plaster as Mary's hands, or the storks. The exposed lateral plane, which looks like some kind of cross section, is composed of striated pleats of hand-painted gray, taupe, pink, and black. A few fingernail-sized white labels, printed vertically in Chinese, interrupt the fields of solid color at irregular intervals. The surface of the object is a smooth and shiny field of



An object in Fitzroy, June 28, 2020. Photo by the author

yellow and white, interrupted by a mound of purplish gray.

It's human skin!—I think excitedly—a blow-up version! These are epidermal layers, and this purplish-gray lump must represent—I conclude—some kind of pathology. I had been talking to Fan about skin in the context of his work, dissecting everything from how it reflects light to how it creates intimacy when you apply cream to it.

15

But when I step closer to the blocky, striated object, I see that it isn't skin at all. What, in the leveling light of the shop, I had interpreted figuratively as flesh tones, now reorganize themselves into more literal, lithospheric hues: at the object's base, a vein of pale artesian blue, then contiguous seams of terra-cotta, coal black, clay pink, and slurried tan, all rifted by an artery of muddied ochre. With a start I realize that this artery carries not *blood* but *magma*; and that the terrain it traverses is not flesh but the side view of a seismic system. On the top, the surface that I'd understood to be a sallow sheath of membrane with a pathological protrusion suddenly shape-shifts into a dappled field of greens and yellows: sunlight in a meadow, capped by a mound of ash. I squint to read the tiny Chinese characters printed on the little white labels and discover specialized vocabulary that is unfamiliar to me in both Chinese and English—terms like “coal seam” (石炭層), “fault scarp” (斷層崖), “unconformity” (不整合), and “impurity” or “inclusion” (夾雜物). I extend a finger and tap the object's side. It emits a dull echo and slides across the table—papier mâché.

At this point the sandy-haired man interjects: *Can I help you with anything?*

In geology, the term used to describe the vertical difference between the summit of a mountain and the neighboring valley or plain is the same as the term used to describe topographic

elevation: *relief*. Despite its dimensionality, the model volcano in the shop on Brunswick Street offers only minimal relief: You can only view it on two planes, either (1) from its side, i.e., whichever side of the object you are facing (which, among scientific illustrations, may be one of the few times when a representational cross section could be argued to be “realistic”⁵), or (2) from above, where your perspective is limited to the figure’s hypothesis of an infinitely expanding plain, as modeled by the rolling slopes and universal vanishing points of the topmost surface, its smoothly blended paint suggesting the paradoxical impossibility of containing the turmoil below.

What occurs to me, therefore, is that this object that I initially mistook for skin but later learned is earth, and that I mistook for dense and then learned is weightless—this object that purports to function as a generalized map of relationships among a variety of geologic phenomena that we associate with volcanos, despite being almost wholly abstracted from its own geographic context—represents something else entirely. As a pedagogical tool, for instance, what it represents is so abstract that it hardly evokes geology at all, but rather time—not a hypothetical moment in geologic time, but rather artifactual time, a “real” time that the object accumulates, history-like, during its fleeting passage from one environment to the next. These environments include an antique shop in Melbourne, yes, but also *all* the real and imagined settings it traveled through before arriving here. Classroom? Natural history museum? Where in the Chinese-speaking world? Here in an antique shop in the antipodean winter of 2020, this unusual object tesseracts me

5. On geologic realism, see Kathryn Yusoff, “Geologic Realism: On the Beach of Geologic Time,” *Social Text* 37, no. 1 (2019): 138, <http://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/handle/123456789/47543>.

through hyperspace, linking me viscerally to those junk shops and antique stores of childhood where I spent so much formative time. The antique store, the junk shop: Besides the layer of dust, they share the narrative conceit of providing a place to make sense of all those things that have otherwise been stripped of context, a place more overtly transactional than, say, a gallery, but a fictional place nonetheless, where pieces of one family's past share space with pieces from another family's past, and all are translated forward in time to "belong" again.

So I feel certain this wedge of figurative volcanic landscape "belongs" in the shop in Fitzroy; it certainly doesn't seem out of place here (though I myself may be), set as it is among model teeth and tarnished specula within a small terrace on an unusually quiet street in a capital city on Wurundjeri land on a continental landmass in the "southern ocean." Can I at least say with confidence that the piece is from the early twentieth century, because the characters are printed in complex and not simplified Chinese? What about Singapore? Could it be a pedagogical tool salvaged from some Chinese-Australian classroom?

The shopkeeper repeats now, somewhat curtly it seems to me: *Mate. Anything I can help you with.*

The sandy-haired man is not as generous a clerk as my father was when he presided over his shop in upstate New York, greeting customers with a stoned congeniality reminiscent of Ellen Burstyn in the 1980 American film *Resurrection*, in which she plays Edna Mae Macauley, the elderly owner of a remote gas station-cum-curiosity shop in Kansas. In the film, Edna survives a car crash that kills her husband but leaves her "cursed" with the power of a healing touch; after years of cultish attention and heartbreak, she decides to withdraw from society and keep her

special power secret. But in the final scene, Edna meets Bobby, the young son of a couple who've stopped for gas on their way across the country; the boy is dying of cancer. Edna entertains Bobby by showing him a two-headed snake in a jar, and then lets him play with a puppy. But when Bobby and his family are about to leave, Edna insists that they take the puppy with them, and demands a lingering hug from the boy in return. As she wraps her arms around him and the closing music begins to play, we understand that the family—and their new puppy—will drive off into the horizon without realizing that little Bobby has been cured of his fatal disease.

I remember, once, Dad caught a woman trying to sneak a small lamp out of the shop under her coat. "Excuse me, ma'am?" said my father, not unkindly, when she reached the door. "You didn't have three breasts when you came in here . . ."

Fitzroy's Steward of Lost Objects is much more guarded. When I ask him about the model volcano, he volunteers only that he bought a collection from a university in Hokkaido a while back. The model might have come from there.

And then silence.

I ask if he knows when it was made.

He replies: Maybe the 1960s?

Then more silence.

So . . . Hokkaido. The object at Mary's feet is not a sculpture of skin from China but a model volcano from twentieth-century Japan. The reason I can read the printed characters is that they are kanji, adapted Sinitic script. If the shopkeeper doesn't want to be more forthcoming about the object's provenance, I can always marshal my academic training and use old technical dictionaries to look up the vocabulary, and then investigate the date when these particular neologisms entered Japanese. I can track

the development of geology as a field within the natural sciences. I can even research the history of Hokkaido University. There are many things I can do, eventually, to construct a picture of where the object came from, how it came to be here, on this land, on this street, in this shop, on this day.

In the present moment, however, it's clear from the shop-keeper's silence that if I want to know more about the object's specific provenance, I'm going to have to buy it.

Which is why, in the suspended animation of the quiet city, I find myself asking a quintessentially late Anthropocene question, namely: How badly do I need a model volcano? At AUD\$375, I figure it's cheaper than the head of a woolly mammoth.

19

On Rocks

20 As I leave the shop on Brunswick Street empty-handed, I am soon lost in thoughts of volcanoes and bio-art and old antique stores. It's a familiar feeling, that of stasis—a passive but pleasant observational mode. I pass, as I have so many times this winter, through several miles of Melbourne's peripheral cityscape: up Queen's Parade, past Clifton Hill, and into the warren of roundabouts and greenways between High and Station Streets. I walk by tweedy centenarian terrace houses with glazed ceramic plaques sporting posh estate names; clapboard cottages with timber porches and sloping corrugated roofs; and solid redbrick blocks of flats from the 1960s and 70s, like the ones I grew to love for their airy indestructibility when I lived in Sydney some years ago. I follow train tracks on footpaths etched into narrow stretches of wild grass under canopies of river red gum and yellow box. The Inner North of Melbourne doesn't have the chorus lines of brilliant purple jacaranda I adored in Sydney, but there are plum, apricot, and lemon trees, as well as banks of bottlebrush and wattle. Depending on the time of year, you might spot crowns of agapanthus, chaotic cascades of jasmine, or the Spencerian curve of the English ivy, as well as—my favorite—an erratic shrub that grows low to the ground with yellow florets like forsythia, and that emits the sugary fragrance of sweet pea.⁶

Never-ending clauses of brightly colored birds modify this otherwise suburban run-on sentence of viridian and sage. At sunset, factions of sweet-voiced pink galahs gather on unmown church lawns to feed alongside iridescent, turquoise grass

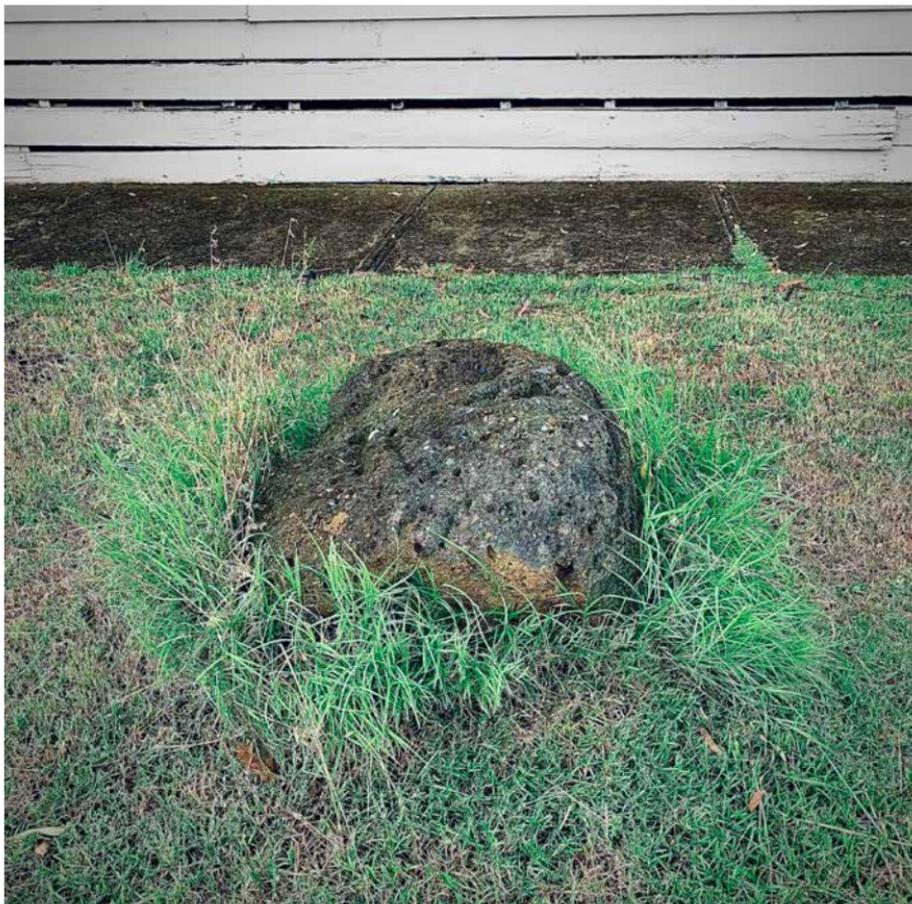
6. Probably Scotch broom, it turns out. An invasive weed.

parrots, who are supervised by teams of chatty rainbow lorikeets and are visited, on occasion, by the bolshy wattlebird and its abrasive *ricochet, ricochet*. At dusk, shrill cauldrons of fruit bats cut the sky with their inky silhouettes. The distance-defying cross talk between these flying creatures rings even louder than usual against the hush of the human city on hold.

21

Floating along in this familiar riot of color, my eye hitches idly on a squat, gray boulder wedged in a thicket of grass growing between the sidewalk and the street. Locals here build whimsical rock gardens in random locations, for example, in the center of a traffic roundabout (a tall cairn covered in wildflowers), or on the turf outside a café (a rhombic polyhedron in a stand of hare's-tail, sandwiched optimistically between a couple of folding chairs). People in this neighborhood often stack smaller rocks into irregular stone walls to shape their flower beds, but they seem to prize bigger boulders as well: I once saw someone lay a custom concrete base in their yard for a specimen the size of a yearling calf.

But there's something different about the earthbound sobriety of the squat, gray boulder that catches my attention that afternoon: Unlike the neighborhood's more fanciful arrangements, it looks untouched by human hands, wild and unaccounted for, accidental. Its dull, pockmarked surface recalls the iconic texture of an asteroid—a blackened chunk, the size of a medicine ball, from a rock exploding in outer space. I picture an ambitious comet streaking through the night sky, only to be intercepted by Ground Control, which forces the would-be meteorite into a holding pattern high above Australia. Here it languishes for what feels like an eternity, losing precious heat and velocity. And then it drops to the earth with a thud.



An object in Northcote, November 28, 2020.
Photo by the author

An obscure agitation stirs in my body. It starts with a signal of electricity that triangulates out from somewhere deep between my shoulder blades—a tickle, an itch. I try ignoring the feeling. I prefer the placeholder of numbness I’ve come to occupy since the loss of my father. What starts off as an almost imperceptible movement in my awareness gathers strength, slowly gaining-momentum until eventually it acquires the propulsive force of a paradigm shift.

Something separates, divides. Something boils, bubbles up, and breaks the surface.

Art can reshuffle the various reference points you formerly depended on to index your visual environment; it can render what you think of as familiar suddenly foreign. This reshuffling of the benchmarks of the familiar can happen quickly—in the time it takes to visit a gallery opening, for instance; an evening—or it can take much longer, only reaching your conscious mind years later, taking you by surprise one day under the afternoon sun, on a sidewalk, in some faraway city.⁷

Nearly two years after my father’s death and my visit to Fan’s studio, and with the afterimage of the model volcano fresh in my mind’s eye, I watch with a stutter of comprehension as some of the otherwise undifferentiated features of the landscape—anonymous blocks of black and brown, which until this moment functioned mainly as backdrop to the everyday glamour of Melbourne’s buildings and birds—start to assert their specificity. Before my eyes, these pixelated bands of ash and umber resolve

7. Here I’m thinking also of the Russian formalist idea of “defamiliarization”: a version of that uncanny phenomenon where you experience a shift in perception—maybe due to a synaptic glitch, or maybe something more cosmic, maybe an unexpectedly stirring visit to an antique shop—that’s often visual and always unexpected, and that can instantaneously transform something deeply familiar to you into something profoundly unknowable.

into figures with features as individual as those of human faces: weedy carbuncles of matte black, porous and shapely, some of them big enough to sit on, even; some small enough to pocket; some pocked with tiny grottos providing lodging for tiny ants; some crowned with a wispy postiche of yellowing vines or covered by fields of rusted red, the texture of sandstone; or festooned with lichens in pale blues, greens, and whites; or shot through with streaks of oily obsidian.⁸ This was igneous rock: volcanic ejecta broadcast widely and randomly in an apocalypse of magma, then of lava.

I inhale and the world feels casually opaque. I exhale and it feels intimate, my breath diffusing out over volcanic plains.

Much of South West Victoria—including the ground beneath my feet—is a volcanic field known as the “Newer Volcanics Province,” part of the Victorian Volcanic Plains that stretch from Melbourne to the South Australian border. It covers an area of 22,000 square kilometers and is the third largest volcanic plains area in the world, after the Deccan Plateau in India and the Snake River Plain in the United States; the basalt layer covering the plains averages sixty meters thick. As the Melbourne artist Nicholas Burridge—who sculpts from local basalt—remarks, “We think of rocks as these solid stable things, but they’re really dynamic if you give them the right time scale.”⁹ In geologic time,

8. Perhaps scoria, rhyolite, and obsidian, respectively? I am still learning to identify the differences.
9. Quoted from “Rivers and Streams 3: Terraform—Nic Burridge and Jason Waterhouse in conversation,” Melbourne’s Living Museum of the West website, <https://soundcloud.com/user-627868554/nic-burridge-and-jason-waterhouse-rivers-and-streams-10042021/s-4bzL2DjetOk>. The description of Burridge’s 2021 exhibition Terraforming at Melbourne’s Living Museum of the West reads: “Nicholas Burridge contributes to this [volcanic] history of transformation through the re-forming of the local material basalt, the rock we walk on in the Victorian Volcanic Plains. During his residency at Melbourne’s Living Museum of the

it was mere moments ago that this entire area was molten lava—floating, cooling, and releasing gas before hardening into porous fabrications of iron and magnesium.

When the Premier of Victoria announces that residents of Melbourne will be restricted to a five-kilometer orbit of our homes starting on July 8, 2020, the radius for me coincides with the east terminus of the volcanic plains, where Merri Creek meets the Yarra River, and where—at some point between 500,000 and 4 million years ago—an outpouring of lava arrested in the banks of a ridge that ran roughly north to south, from present-day Preston to Alphington to Kew.¹⁰ The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people are the traditional custodians of this land, have been for thousands of years, and always will be.¹¹ But starting in the early nineteenth century, Europeans invaded. On June 6, 1835, John Batman signed an infamous treaty to “buy” 2,000 kilometers—essentially the land on which he would found Melbourne—from the Wurundjeri. As someone born in upstate New York, I think of the 1626 “sale” of Manhattan, which the

West, Nicholas Burridge has activated this emblematic material transforming it back into a ‘fluid-rock.’ This intervention upon the stone is one that remembers Melbourne’s geologic past while also being an expression of our current geologic epoch, the Anthropocene.” For a generalist’s discussion of the plains, see Jeremy Bourke, “Forged by Fire: Volcanoes in Victoria,” *Australian Geographic*, March–April 2017, 55, <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/science-environment/2017/05/volcanic-victoria/>.

10. “Beginning about 4 million years ago and continuing into recent times, lava flows of the Newer Volcanics began to erupt from many points to the north and northwest of Melbourne. They flowed down the old valleys of streams, including Merri Creek and Darebin Creek. The eastern boundary to the lava flows was formed by the higher land in the present sites of Preston, Alphington, and Kew.” Geoff Lacey, “The Newer Volcanics and recent alluvium,” in *Still Glides the Stream: The Natural History of the Yarra from Heidelberg to Yarra Bend*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Australia Scholarly Publishing, 2018), 17.
11. See “Merri Creek,” Darebin Libraries website, <https://heritage.darebinlibraries.vic.gov.au/article/397>. See also Lacey, *Still Glides the Stream*, 136 et passim

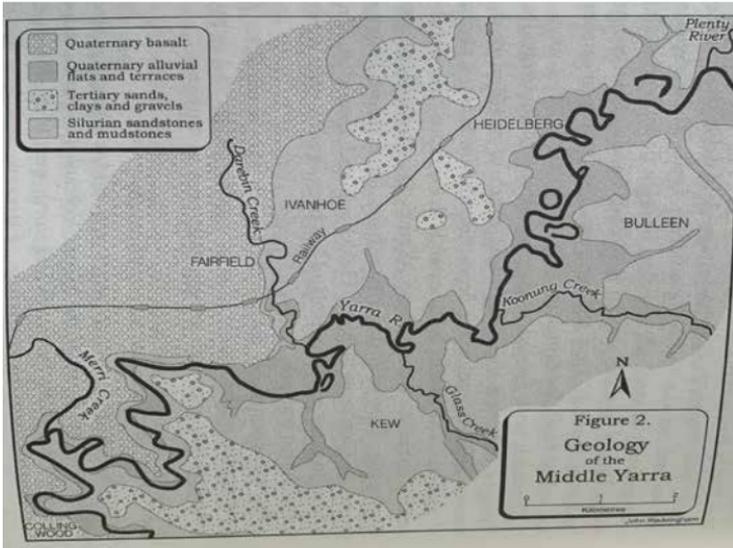
Dutch took from the Canarsie tribe of the Lenape people, for the modern equivalent of USD\$25.

26

In Australia, consistent with policies of violent cultural erasure in colonial contexts from North America to Africa, on October 10, 1835, the British government took an additional step: It declared Australia *terra nullius*—a land without sovereign inhabitants—in a genocidal legal fiction that thenceforward obviated even the need for gestural treaties with the Wurundjeri and other Indigenous peoples, simply by not recognizing them as sovereign, or indeed human, in the first place. (The doctrine of *terra nullius*, it must be noted, remained in place until 1992.)¹² In 1837, Victoria’s first “Native Police Corps” was set up, to train young Aboriginal men to “defeat . . . the Aboriginal guerrilla resistance in the areas outlying Melbourne,” and to enforce government interests in the Victorian goldfields; the same year, a mission was set up in the Royal Botanic Gardens.¹³ And in

12. The British adopted the notion of *terra nullius* for the land on October 10, 1835; see “Governor Bourke’s Proclamation 1835 (UK),” Museum of Australian Democracy website, <https://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-42.html>. Regarding *terra nullius*, Tiffany Lethabo King says of another context in the Western hemisphere: “For the human to continue to evolve as an unfettered form of self-actualizing (and expanding) form of Whiteness, Black and Indigenous people must die or be transformed into lesser forms of humanity—and, in some cases, become nonhuman altogether.” King, *The Black Shoals*, 21.

13. “The Native Police Corps were the first police force on the gold fields of Victoria. In early 1849 the Native Police were dispatched to Daisy Hill to guard a site where gold had been discovered on Crown Land. A letter from the Crown Commissioner of Lands to Superintendent La Trobe stated that the Native Police’s role was, ironically, to prevent any unauthorised occupation of Crown Lands. The Native Police were also the first show of government authority at the first official gold rush site at Mt. Alexander, arriving in late October 1851. The Native Police also escorted the first pack-horse convoys that carried gold to Melbourne from the goldfields (Fels 1986).” They were used as enforcement, “to control the many ‘turbulent ruffians’ who were at the goldfields (Fels 1986).” Darren Griffin and Abby Cooper, “Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Survey Part 1: Desktop Assessment,” prepared for the National Trust of Australia (Victoria), May 29, 2019, 23–27. On the mission in



Map of a section of the Victorian Volcanic Plains, in Geoff Lacey, *Still Glides the Stream: The Natural History of the Yarra From Heidelberg to Yarra Bend* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2018). Photo by the author

1839, the Port Philip Aboriginal Protectorate was established at the juncture of the Merri and the Yarra to “civilize” Indigenous peoples by conducting “European-style” children’s “classes.”¹⁴

28 The story of the annihilating force of settler colonialism in the Newer Volcanics Province—and in particular its erasure of thousands of years of Aboriginal practices of land management—is a story you can also tell through stone: Indigenous peoples used volcanic rock from the plains to build windbreaks and shelters, and to engineer elaborate eel traps and weirs in massive concourses chiseled into the rock and earth.¹⁵ But early colonizers identified the rich volcanic soil as good for growing familiar crops, and so established farms and harvested rock to create partitions in the land, simultaneously destroying “many [of the fish traps for] agriculture and rock collection for fencing, commercial purposes, and home gardens.”¹⁶ Later, new waves

the Royal Botanic Gardens, see *The Wurundjeri Willam: The Original Inhabitants of Moonee Valley* (Moonee Valley City Council, 2012), <https://mvcc.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Wurundjeri-William-Book.pdf>.

14. See <https://heritage.darebinlibraries.vic.gov.au/article/397>. On the “treaty” signing and location, see Rex Harcourt, *Southern Invasion: Northern Conquest. Story of the Founding of Melbourne* (Blackburn South: Golden Point Press, 2001). On the “Protectorate Station” and establishment of Aboriginal police corps, see I. Clark and T. Heydon, *A Bend in the Yarra: A History of the Merri Creek Protectorate Station and Merri Creek Aboriginal School, 1841–1851* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004).
15. See <https://heritage.darebinlibraries.vic.gov.au/article/397>; and Lacey, *Still Glides the Stream*, 136 et passim. The Darebin Libraries website has clear discussions and illustrations of Gunditjmara aquaculture and a video interview featuring Tyson Lovett-Murray, quoted below in this essay, describing the weirs and fish-trapping systems built into, and out of, volcanic flow; see https://www.deadlystory.com/page/culture/history/Gunditjmara_people_build_sophisticated_Budj_Bim_eel_trap_system. See also Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture* (Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books, 2018), 72. Pascoe’s chapter on “Aquaculture” describes these and similar structures in rich detail.
16. *Ibid.*, 78. For a poetic intervention into describing the eel traps and volcanic landscape, see also Ross Gibson, *Basalt*, no. 5 in the *Lost Rocks* project (Tasmania:

of colonizers began using the native grasslands for livestock, digging up rock from the paddocks to build dry stone walls to line the ridges. (Today, many of the stone walls remain, even though the grasslands and soil were decimated within a few years by sheep farming, and are all but wiped out.¹⁷)

When I think about the whimsical rock gardens in the roundabouts and between the plastic chairs in suburban Melbourne, my breath seizes in my chest.

29

I had never given any thought to the symbolic significance of rocks—specifically, to describing them—nor considered the metaphoric implications of geologic description in literature, except, maybe, when reading about Chinese gardens or about stones from Lake Tai in Jiangsu. Does form relate to function in the aesthetics of stone? Do descriptions of rocks perform special functions when they appear in memoir and other self-referential creative modalities?

A Published Event, 2017), https://www.lostrocks.net/media/pages/books/basalt/828454ab38-1640062466/basalt_gibson_2017_lost_rocks_ape.pdf. My thanks to Nicholas Burrridge for bringing Gibson's book to my attention.

17. DPCD South West Victoria Landscape Assessment Study | The Western Volcanics Plain, 2013. Geoff Lacey describes a variety of grassland types that used to cover vast portions of the Newer Volcanics Plains, including, for example, "Plains Grassy Woodland": "This is an open grassy woodland on fertile soils on flats and gently undulating plains. The soils may be alluvial, or derived either from sedimentary rock or basalt. Generally this community is dominated by River Red Gum, Yellow Box, Manna Gum and some wattle species may also be present. On the basalt plains, Drooping Sheoak and Silver Banksia were once widespread. . . . The understory consists of a diverse array of grasses, sedges, lilies and other herbs. Species may include Kangaroo Grass, Weeping Grass, Common Tussock-grass, Common Wheat-grass, Wallaby, Plume and Spear-grasses, Spiny and Wattle Mat-rush, Flax-lilies, Chocolate-lily, Yellow Rush-lily, Austral Stork's-bill, Pink Bindweed, Clustered and Sticky Everlasting." Lacey, *Still Glides the Stream*, 247. See also https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/94815/ROR-Chapter-1-Introduction.pdf.

The memoir *My Meteorite: Or, Without the Random There Can Be No New Thing* (2020), by the artist Harry Dodge, suggests they might. Dodge's book—the title of which refers to a chunk of interstellar rock the author has purchased on eBay—explores among other things how autobiographical “coincidence” (a chance encounter in a bar, a shared fondness for an obscure novel) can affect the passage of subjective time. The book counterposes the author's efforts to identify an impactful sculpture he saw as a child, for example, with a narrative of his father's present-day decline into dementia and death. The language Dodge uses to describe his meteorite against the backdrop of this emotional time-travel reads to me almost interchangeably with the language of grief, as if he's describing grief itself. “There it was,” he writes,

an iron glob of gum. It was buzzing, it was glowing, just smaller than a human head, but much heavier. Unbelievably heavy for its size, like it had a different type of gravity that applied to it; an alien gravity might have applied. It was dark gray but metallic too and had deep pits lined in black: gooey tortuous crevices, folds which were also penetrated by black and burnished in zigs and snoods, coruscant at its facets, or scallops, its outermost convexities, which could have been observed at this point to have been no less vulnerable for being lustrous.¹⁸

Dodge's choice of the meteorite as a (literal) touchstone for his narrative captivates me. As a recursive literary device, the meteorite anchors the unfolding of individual experience. Yet as an

18. Harry Dodge, *My Meteorite, Or, Without the Random There Can Be No New Thing* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 77.

object with a material referent, the meteorite speaks to a broader, more immanent condition: a turbulent “now” in which multiple developmental narratives of history (the Anthropocene, say, or the impending climate apocalypse) seem to be converging so swiftly on an apotheosis of meaning that metaphor itself faces an extinction event. Dodge’s meteorite is a metaphor on fire; miraculously, it can soar through the stratosphere and survive entry into narrative without losing sense of its materiality, gathering speed as it transitions from space junk to novelty item to literary device.

Soon I start to see rock-writing everywhere, the stony inclusions of author upon author. In his subtly satirical novel *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City* (2012), for instance, the virtuoso Hong Kong writer Dung Kai-cheung writes an account of a fictionalized future Hong Kong, a city that, Atlantis-like, has long since vanished. The book is structured as a kind of fabulist historiography, where archaeologists of the future who want to reconstruct details of the ancient city must depend solely on old maps, texts, and other scraps of data.¹⁹ But the archaeologists can’t agree on how to interpret the data, particularly when it comes to geology. In a chapter titled “Geological Discrimination,” one faction, the “Granite School,” rejects the application of the term “native soil” as a descriptor for the ancient city, because to them it reads like a kind of “flat-surface . . . indigenous chauvinism.” After all, they argue, soil is frangible and shallow; so, when describing the city of the past, it makes more sense to cite granite—a more durable substance—as a metaphor. “[The Granite School] emphasize[d] a vertical and historical excavation [of the past],” expounds *Atlas*’s authoritative historical narrator, “presenting rock strata in three-dimensional sections

19. Dung Kai-cheung, *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, Anders Hansson, and Bonnie S. McDougall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).



On experimenting with clay for the first time, the artist Cauleen Smith remarks, “The planet and our star sing and burn and breathe,” a realization she notes may be, for ceramicists, “so basic as to be prosaic.” @cauleen_smith, Instagram, March 9, 2021. Screenshot by the author

and thereby exposing granite as the vast foundation [of Hong Kong] at the deepest underground level.”²⁰

Making a direct link between Dung Kai-cheung’s fictional characterization of geological controversies and the present-day “official narratives . . . that seek to deprive future Hong Kong of its very ‘soil,’”²¹ the architect and landscape historian Maxime Decaudin exposes the repressed connections between imperialism and geology by deep diving into the actual historical record of debates about geology in colonial Hong Kong. Traditional notions of geology condition us to view rocks as merely a backdrop to social and political life, he warns: “Granite did not simply lie in the landscape, waiting to be quarried or blasted, nor did the magnetite deposit of Ma On Shan merely wait to be mined.”²² Closer to home, anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli coins the term *geontology* to describe (among other things) the political economics of narratives linking Indigenous peoples to rocks in Northern Australia. Consistent with Decaudin, Povinelli suggests that popular rhetoric about the perceived “life” of rocks in Indigenous contexts is often less about any metaphysical debate regarding the psychic life of actual stones than it is about what it takes to get and grant access to resources under late liberalism.

20. *Ibid.*, 140.

21. See Maxime Decaudin, “‘Geological discrimination’: Granite and the early British colonisation of Hong Kong,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 59 (October 2019): 101.

22. *Ibid.*, 79. Povinelli’s is one more approach to abstracting from the idea that rocks are “inanimate,” or in Decaudin’s words, “merely backdrop,” by looking out the corner of her eye—on the way to another thesis, about settler liberalism and the mechanics of performing indigeneity through fake or amplified narratives of animism—at the possibility that one way to destabilize the objectification of rocks/geology/landscape lies in exploring the tensions between Indigenous, “Indigenous,” and settler-liberal narratives of geology in Australia. Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 5.

An example of geontology in action is when colonial rhetorics in media and government attribute the “*inability . . . to differentiate [among] the kinds of things [like rocks and humans] that have agency, subjectivity, and intentionality*” (e.g., the inability to distinguish between rocks and “living” things) to Indigenous peoples, which in turn facilitates “casting them into a premodern mentality.”²³

In Tiffany Lethabo King’s powerful book *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (2019), geological formation becomes method. King sees the figure of the shoal as an “organizing metaphor” that can hold the complexities of the “encounter between Black studies and Native studies.”²⁴ For King, shoals conceptually interrupt North American and European meta-narratives that symbolically associate people of the Black diaspora with the ocean and Native peoples with the land in ways that wind up producing a false binary between the two. “The shoal creates a rupture,” writes King, “and at the

23. See “On Biopolitics and the Anthropocene: Elizabeth Povinelli, interviewed by Kathryn Yusoff and Mat Coleman,” *Society and Space*, March 7, 2014, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/on-biopolitics-and-the-anthropocene>, where Povinelli is quoted as saying: “The talk at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin was a beginning, an outlining of this formation of power through one example. As you say, there I described how, for Indigenous friends and colleagues of mine in Australia, biography and geography are in a relation of extimacy (*extimité*). There is not biography (life-descriptions) on the one side and geography (nonlife-descriptions) on the other. They do not sit side-by-side like a spoon in a cup or a cup on a table. Their very natures are internal and external to each other simultaneously and thus their distinction essentially without meaning.”

24. “I posit that Black thought, Black study, Black aesthetics, and Black expression function as a shoal that interrupts the course and momentum of the flow of critical theories about genocide, slavery, and humanity in the Western Hemisphere. More specifically, the book intervenes in contemporary discourses and theories of colonialism and settler colonialism in North America that dictate how the academy and ‘the left’ talk about (or do not talk about) Indigenous genocide, Indigenous peoples, settlers, arrivants, and Black people.” King, *The Black Shoals*, xv.

same time opens up analytical possibilities for thinking about Blackness as exceeding the metaphors and analytics of water and for thinking of Indigeneity as exceeding the symbol and analytic of land.”²⁵ As a place right off the shore, the shoal refuses the distinction between land and sea; it has the power to break the momentum of approaching ships and to thwart the tendency of the white Left to euphemize the violences of slavery and genocide in North America; the shoal has the power to posit instead a space of potential collaborative cohabitation, resistance, and assertion of existence on its own terms.

Perhaps rocks are the ur-metaphoric substance. They’ve been here from the beginning, beneath our feet and beyond the shoreline; in the shallows and along a stony rise. In the moment of their revelation, rocks can instantly connect us to other people both diachronically (like granite, to those who inhabited the earth before) and synchronically (like soil, to those who inhabit it now). King talks about a meditative state that may leave a writer to feel mused by geologies; it’s a state that might be triggered in a certain “spot in the road, on the route home, on the way to the familiar places that force you to slow down,” an actual geo-physical site that bumps you off autopilot and forces you to become “a more alert driver and navigator.”²⁶ As rock connects to rock, the geo-physical site is recognized as a shared one, and thus becomes a domain for the exercise of ethics—the revealing of landscaped relationships I can’t unsee.

My father used to keep stacks of black notebooks in which he scribbled poems and drew countless convoluted abstractions. He also kept a set of colored pencils, which, as a child, I

25. *Ibid.*, 4.

26. *Ibid.*, xv

interpreted as an invitation to collaborate. Once I scored giant purple circles deep into the pages of a group of poems he called “Gyroflexion,” about a misunderstood, stoned man from outer space. Walking through Melbourne nearly half a century later, one of his poems presents itself after a long hiatus. “Stone lives, lies quiet,” he’d written, in language accessible to my six-year-old self, now a time capsule to my present self. “One breath, a thousand centuries.”

Stumbling

Once when I was jogging along Merri Creek, I tripped on a jagged pyramid of hardened lava jutting up from the ground. I wasn't thinking about metaphor as I clutched my bloody elbow and stumbled to a nearby surgery.

37

Likewise, when I first encountered the globules of glass flushed with tides of melanin in Fan's temporary studio, my vision was occluded by grief. But here in Melbourne I stumble on a new interpretation: Perhaps grief does not obstruct vision at all. Perhaps grief is method. In her punchy conclusion to *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), Kathryn Yusoff, Professor of Inhuman Geography at Queen Mary University of London, writes: "No geology is neutral."²⁷ Rereading Yusoff's declaration from my present moment, I realize that both Harry Dodge's literary meteorite and the representational magma I'd fixated on in Fitzroy are geological figures, and that as geological figures they are both—literally—the raw ore of contemporary political economics. Because regardless of whether they fell from the sky or were ejected from the earth's molten core, the meteorite and the magma now join other geological phenomena in being subject to the grievances of extraction and exchange. When writers create metaphor, we effectively borrow against an object's symbolic capital to create value in our work. So if meteorites and magma are transformations of geology, then when they appear in literature, don't they inevitably also bring the traumatic legacies of value that stratify present-day terrestrial life? In that sense you could say that metaphor itself is a kind of capital,

27. Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 108.

albeit one designed to profit the writer. *No metaphor is neutral.*

38 Yusoff writes that geology is “[both] a category and [a] praxis of dispossession” that “has determined the geographies and genealogies of colonial extraction,”²⁸ and in particular, that “the geologic practices established in [Australia, Canada, and India] continue . . . to underwrite current neocolonial extraction processes [and] unsettle native title and reservation lands.”²⁹ Symptomatic of this ongoing colonial legacy is the fact that my own belated process of discovering the volcanic nature of the land beneath my feet is not an isolated experience at all, but something that happens even to people who grew up here. For example, Peter Haffenden, a white man who works at Melbourne’s Living Museum of the West, long didn’t recognize the significance of the volcanic grasslands; he says he used to dismiss them as “just grass,” or “just boring old plains,” as compared to other, flashier features of the Victorian landscape. But now when he thinks about the grasslands, Haffenden says, “I get vertigo, because I know about the upheavals, the slides, the cracks, the flows.”³⁰ Yet Haffenden’s and my own incidental awakenings to the nature of the region’s local geology contrast sharply to the perceptions of people whose land was stolen, violently, out from under them.

As a white-skinned Ashkenazi Jewish settler in Australia, the initial invisibility of the volcanic landscape as it appeared to me

28. *Ibid.*, 67–68.

29. *Ibid.*, 83.

30. “An interview with Kerrie Poliness and Peter Haffenden,” in “Volcano Dreaming: A community engagement journey” insert, in *Land of Sweeping Plains: Managing and Restoring the Native Grasslands of South-eastern Australia*, ed. Nicholas S. G. Williams, Adrian Marshall, and John W. Morgan (Clayton South, Victoria: CSIRO Publishing, 2015). I am only just starting to learn this history. A recent essay I find helpful is Clare Wright, “Masters of the future or heirs of the past? Mining, history and the right to know,” *Griffith Review* 71 (January 2021), <https://www.griffithreview.com/contributors/clare-wright/>.

comes dangerously close to reproducing what King calls “conquistador humanism’s narrative strategy of ‘invisibilizing’ Indigenous genocide in favor of attention to ‘White settlers’ relationship to land.”³¹ In fact, so much of what people like Haffenden and I have been ignorant of tracks precisely with State and industrial narratives of economic “development,” narratives according to which there *is* categorically no land that is not “developable” land—narratives based on the lie that the undeveloped landscape was uninhabited in the first place. According to these narratives, certain kinds of land don’t exist outside of extraction politics that lay bare the explicit genealogical ties between colonial-era strategies of genocide and the suppression of Indigenous sovereignty.³²

In the face of these erasures, Indigenous resistance to dispossession and retellings of these stories about the Victorian volcanic landscape within that resistance persist.³³ West of Melbourne,

31. King, *The Black Shoals*, 84. “Conquistador humanism is the crafting and sustaining of European human life and self-actualization through Black and Indigenous death.” And: “As the fervor of White settler colonial studies grows, a form of discursive genocide is performed as Native scholars, texts, and analytics disappear from the conversation. Furthermore, an actual discussion of Native genocide is displaced by a focus on White settlers’ relationship to land rather than their parasitic and genocidal relationship to Indigenous and Black peoples” (68).
32. One example: Large deposits of gold were discovered in a part of central Victoria that the Dja Dja Warung people now call “Upside Down Country”; the miners “cut down trees for firewood and building, diverted creeks and rivers and dug holes in the ground, pulling up large volumes of earth. Since that time, mining has been constant in Dja Dja Wurrung Country. This has left a legacy of soil erosion, salinity and toxicity from contaminants such as arsenic and mercury. The country around the goldfields is very sick and a significant program of remediation is required. As custodians of all Dja Dja Wurrung land, we feel a deep responsibility to heal this Country so that it can be healthy and functioning once again.” *Dhelkunya Dja Country Plan, 2014–2034* (Victoria: Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, 2014), <http://www.djadjawurrung.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Dja-Dja-Wurrung-Country-Plan.pdf>.
33. See The Koori History website, <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/indexb.html>, in particular the site’s time line, <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/timeline/histimeline>.

Tyson Lovett-Murray, a Gunditjmara man and a local guide, tells the history of how the Gunditjmara, forced to “steal” sheep to survive when their traditional food sources vanished, were saved by the region’s rough volcanic landscape, as the armed colonizers couldn’t follow them onto that surface on horseback; volcanic land in this narrative is not incidental or expendable but critical to the group’s survival.³⁴ In 2019, after more than ten years of hard lobbying by the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, the volcanic Budj Bim Cultural Landscape was added to the UNESCO World Heritage Site list: the first case where a “cultural” landscape has been recognized in this way. Renarrativizing the volcanic eel traps in another medium that same year, the Kokatha and Nukunu artist Yhonnie Scarce, in collaboration with the Melbourne architecture studio Edition Office, constructed *In Absence*, a monumental timber tower that “evokes the design of traditional eel traps that channeled water flows to enable large-scale sustainable food production,” with interior walls dotted with 1,600 hand-blown black glass *murnong* (yams) “[i]ntended . . . to represent oil from fish or eels, water, medicinal sap from trees, fish and leeches, and the metaphorical mapping of waterways and stars.”³⁵

- html. On performance of Indigenous “animism,” see Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 20–21.
34. “The Gunditjmara hunting grounds were disturbed when the sheep and cattle came in, and they spread out the kangaroos, which meant the Gunditjmara then had to take sheep and cattle,” Lovett-Murray said. “Gunditjmara used to leave the stony rises, grab 100–200 sheep and hunt them back into the stony rises for the meat. In most other parts of Australia, the ‘settlers’ would follow and let loose with their guns to teach them a lesson, but here they couldn’t ride horses onto that volcanic landscape.” Quoted in Bourke, “Forged by Fire.”
35. “2019 Architecture Commission: In Absence | Yhonnie Scarce and Edition Office,” National Gallery of Victoria (NGC) website, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/exhibition/2019-architecture-commission/>. Thanks to Nicholas Burridge for alerting me to Scarce’s work.

Narratives that ascribe a certain agency to Victorian geology contrast sharply with more predatory geo-liberal myths about the raw “fungibility” of the region’s geologic resources—myths according to which rock can only ever be a “neutral” material, a “resource” to be exploited, something unrestrictedly available for extraction and conversion into capital. Thinking about the agency of rocks lures me back to the shoals in King’s writing. In conversation with a lineage of Black thinkers, King creates what she calls a “methodology of shoaling” where “disrupt[ing] . . . the conquistador imagination and settlement [and] . . . interven[ing] in violence and putting texts and objects together or in friction with one another” can yield “a small opening and place to slip through the otherwise closed system of violence.”³⁶ In her analysis of an eighteenth-century map of the South Carolina and Georgia coast by William Gerard de Brahm, for instance, King identifies the map’s figuring of Black bodies as fungible (or “open, exchangeable, shifting, and ever in flux”) as a “failed attempt to control Black movement through representation”; she proposes instead to subvert “the logic of fungibility as an unfettered form of the one-directional flow of White domination” by “reclaim[ing] . . . fungibility as a resource for Black enslaved people rather than [as] an impediment to Black practices

36. See King, *The Black Shoals*, 52 and 78. King’s discussion of fungibility engages with discussions by a lineage of Black thinkers including Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, Katherine McKittrick, Frank Wilderson, and Saidiya Hartman; and on fugitivity, she engages with Fred Moten, C. Riley Snorton, and others. In her discussion of a “methodology of shoaling,” King cites, for example, McKittrick’s “Diachronic Loops/Deadweight Tonnage/Bad Made Measure,” noting that McKittrick “argues [for a] critical shift [that would] create a ‘transgressive ground of understanding’ where new relations between texts are forged and create a space of intertextuality where we can ‘notice’ ruptures and ‘momentary dislodgings’ of normative anti-Black violence” (78; King is citing pages 4 and 10 of McKittrick, “Diachronic Loops/Deadweight Tonnage/Bad Made Measure,” *Cultural Geographies* 23, no. 1 [2016]: 3–18).

of—or, as [C. Riley] Snorton argues ‘for’—freedom.”³⁷ Indeed, in *The Black Shoals*, King’s moving engagements with aesthetic objects model a methodology of shoaling highly attuned to arts and aesthetic practices. In her reading of Julie Dash’s 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, King shows how *Daughters*, unlike de Brahm’s map, “resist[s] reducing Black bodies to merely laboring bodies.”³⁸ And in her analysis of the 2015–19 sculptural work *Revisiting Sycorax* by the Black Canadian painter, sculptor, and educator Charmaine Lurch, King reads the work as one which “enables those who encounter it to think about the distinct world and subject-making violence of slavery (and its afterlife) and Indigenous genocide as unique and irreducible social relations without producing hard borders and edges around them.”³⁹

“The shoal,” writes King, “represents a process, formation, and space that exists beyond binary thinking.” Though the shoal is “a site of conceptual difficulty,” she notes, it is nonetheless a place where “decolonial aesthetic practices [can] sculpt new epistemologies and sensibilities that shape the contours of humanness in more expansive ways.”⁴⁰

37. King, *The Black Shoals*, 26. Full quote: “In Chapter 2, I read the cartographic depiction of Black bodies as fungible—open, exchangeable, shifting, and ever in flux—as a failed attempt by British settlers to control Black movement through representation. Subverting the logic of fungibility as an unfettered form of the one-directional flow of White domination, I rewrite fungibility and fugitivity as the product of a dialectical relationship. In very much the same ways that Black fugitivity morphs and changes according to the vicissitudes of power, fungibility and its modes of manipulating Blackness respond to Black fugitivity. Reclaiming fungibility as a resource for Black enslaved people rather than an impediment to Black practices of—or, as Snorton argues ‘for’—freedom stretches Blackness’s terrain. Black ‘fungible fugitivity’ as an expansive and unwieldy concept also interfaces with Indigeneity in resourceful and unpredictable ways.” See C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

38. *Ibid.*, 117.

39. *Ibid.*, 35.

40. *Ibid.*, 28–29.

At Recess, the glass globules experimentally infused with different concentrations of homemade melanin and distributed at random across the lunar landscape of Fan's provisional studio now strike me as hypermaterial, substantial in ways I hadn't considered; like rock and not like rock, I realize, the objects contain a key ingredient: a concentrated symbolic element of figurations of racial fungibility, deliberately incorporated in the sculptural works both to absorb and refract the radioactivity of signifiers of race and value along with commerce and histories of invasion and extraction. Thanks to advancements in gene sequencing, the melanin Fan manipulates for his sculptures has been cultivated in laboratories, without human bodies, using *E. coli* bacteria;⁴¹ it has never been, nor will it ever be, part of a human (or for that matter squid, or mushroom) body. This means the material itself, in its aesthetic application, has always

43

41. On protective qualities of melanin, see, for example, Luz María Martínez, Alfredo Martínez, and Guillermo Gosset, "Production of Melanins With Recombinant Microorganisms," *Frontiers*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fbioe.2019.00285/full>. On using *E. coli* as a substrate, see Jes Fan: "I worked with a for-hire lab called Brooklyn Bio. I approached them with my residency budget and told them I wanted to make melanin, then incorporate it into my sculpture. So we genetically modified *E. coli*—and I was adamant about using *E. coli* instead of the other option, yeast. Living in Hong Kong under British colonial rule, and also living in the US for ten years now, I've observed how racial fear often runs parallel to our fears of microbial contaminations. For instance, one reason why the most expensive real estate in Hong Kong is situated at The Peak is because, during the bubonic plague, the governor reserved residence above a certain altitude for the English. There was a theory that the higher the altitude, the more difficult it would be for germs to travel. And if you look at Jim Crow laws, you again see racial fears running parallel to hygienic fears—especially those around segregating bodies of water." In Deboleena Roy and Jes Fan interview, "God is the Microsphere," *Art in America*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/god-microsphere-jes-fan-1234588566/>.

already been kept categorically distinct from its customary referent: that chemical substance so often understood to be the “smallest unit of race,” a notional molecule that, starting with its roots in the (literal) Enlightenment, has come to play such a central role in the construction of some of the greatest modern fictions of “race” or even “science” since the invention of the human.⁴² In a more immediate sense, by making art out of melanin, the artist points to the arbitrariness of investing a single molecule of something not-exclusively-human with such anthropomorphic and social significance; it’s only incidental that the work is also beautiful.

But Fan also challenges viewers’ assumptions about the relationship of biology to identity, as with his specific technique of material decontextualization. For example, as part of the video installation *Mother is a Woman* (2018), Fan infused estrogen he extracted from his mother’s urine (in a home laboratory) into a skin cream that viewers could apply to their own faces. For the works *Testo-candle* (2016) and *Testo-soap* (2017), he created “mock-artisanal products” using pharmaceutical testosterone suspended in cottonseed oil, effectively teasing apart hormones as biological objects from the social lives that animate them.⁴³ In his melanin work, then, Fan again decontextualizes a biological element from its social life, by decoupling that notorious signifier of race—melanin—from its enabling epistemologies of “biology” and “nature.” How are we to read the pigment when it has been so profoundly divested of the structures that usually shape our understanding of it, including, and perhaps especially,

42. D. Fullwiley, “The Molecularization of Race: Institutionalizing Human Difference in Pharmacogenetics Practice,” *Science as Culture* 16, no. 1 (2007): 1–30.

43. See, for example, Emily Colucci, “This Artist Is Using Cosmetics Made With Their Mother’s Urine to Rethink Gender,” *Them*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.them.us/story/artist-using-cosmetics-made-with-mothers-urine>. The piece has been written about widely.

the body itself? Yusoff (Professor of Inhuman Geology) issues a parallel challenge when she calls out the relationships among discourses of Blackness and the inhuman embedded in rhetorics of geological extraction and materiality, writing that “[t]hinking Blackness in terms of the relations of materiality, of coal black, black gold, black metal, and how these are configured in discourses of geology and its lexicons of matter, uncovers the transactions between geology and inhumanism as a mode of both production (or extraction) and subjection (or a violent mode of geologic life).”⁴⁴ In his radical decontextualization of a heavily invested signifier of race, itself the false product of a false science, Fan thus closes the circle of Black value described in Yusoff’s core logics and holds up a mirror to geo-colonialism’s lie of objectivity.

Thinking back to the shop on Brunswick Street and my encounter with the model volcano and the Japanese script labels I initially mistook as Chinese script, I see now that what I took to be a task of translation was an act of colonial historiography. Because to “translate” this geological vocabulary between and among imperial languages is to “translate,” along with it, the inscription of colonial epistemologies on the land, a semiotic convergence that risks producing a kind of linguistic *terra nullius* of its own—something for which there is, by definition, no metaphor. In translating the volcano between imperial languages, I risk creating, as collateral, a blank or unmarked space on which new geological vocabulary may be inscribed, with the potential to erase anything that came before it. Among these erasures: Indigenous narratives of the land and the interpersonal and sociopolitical histories of colonization that condition the

44. Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 9.

very act of translation; etymological questions that end in a state of dispossession.

46

Consider, for example, that Bunganditj people have recounted, over *thousands of years*, the stories of eruptions in what is now known as Mount Gambier.⁴⁵ As a translator, I'm not without recourse; I can resist the impulse to establish immediate equivalencies between terms; I can slow that process down—"shoal" it—before leaping to assert some authority over the translated meaning. I make choices about what to keep, and how; I decide what I can tolerate to leave out; I leave things out. Often, these feel like metaphysical decisions and generally are made before the words hit the page. When Fan encloses a murmur of melanin in a crystal capsule, he literalizes these geologic abstractions by isolating and (re)inserting one of race's most potent material signifiers—melanin—into the rock, in glass so irresistibly transparent that it's impossible *not* to engage with the pigment's materiality (just as it's impossible *not* to be confronted with the artificial or manufactured nature of the vessel itself): You want to touch it, to push your face up against it, to distinguish somehow among the more opaque and translucent streams of color, to approach the glass from all angles. This is not some sublime viewing experience; it's not a heavily mediated stumbling to awareness, not at all.

The gush and billow of pigment in the rock is right there for you to see.

45. See, for example, Patrick D. Nunn, "When the Bullin shrieked: Aboriginal memories of volcanic eruption thousands of years ago," *The Conversation*, August 22, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/when-the-bullin-shrieked-aboriginal-memories-of-volcanic-eruptions-thousands-of-years-ago-81986>; and "Australian Indigenous volcano stories," http://members.ozemail.com.au/~mmichie/indigenous_volcanoes.html.



Jes Fan, glass with melanin, 2018.
Photo by the author

When it comes to sculptures in or about biological materials such as melanin or blood or urine or hormones—in this critical moment in the history of earth’s geology vis-à-vis human intervention, the literal nature of the medium (the stone, the melanin) is everything; the nature of the medium makes all the difference in the world. What does it mean when there is no lag or delay (visceral, intellectual, or otherwise) between the medium and its delivery of a critique of substance? In his book about “speculative” taxidermy and art in the Anthropocene, Giovanni Aloi observes that in using animal by-products, taxidermy as art “works as a crux of past and present discourses and practices that can never be reduced to internal economies of the works of art, or simply to artistic discourses. It always, and insistently, gestures to the outside, to the past, to the present, and it regularly provides a platform upon which the possibility of different futures can emerge.”⁴⁶ In its purer form, a sculptural work “about” geology that uses geologic materials would likewise invoke both the immediacy of the material itself and, as with the self-reflexivity of the Situationists, what it means to “extract” an artwork from its specific spatiotemporal environment. A recent exhibit by Nicholas Burridge (the Melbourne sculptor who works in local basalt) called *Terraforming* included pieces for which the artist *remelted* Victorian basalt, firing it at high temperatures until it liquified, cooled, and resolidified as “volcanic glass” (essentially obsidian).⁴⁷

46. Giovanni Aloi, *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, 65.

47. “During his residency at Melbourne’s Living Museum of the West, Nicholas Burridge has activated this emblematic material transforming it back into a

Circulating in the art world as a kind of meta-commodity in and of itself, Fan's melanin work (and, to a significant extent, much of his work featuring biological materials) makes meaning, at least partly, through its formal expression as analogue to the natural world, an association further strengthened by the artist's use of actual "aftermarket" biological materials as his media. Like Burridge's sculptures in stone, Fan's work functions formally with a degree of literality, in or as a new territory, that ultimately *exceeds* meaning as it may be extracted from metaphor, and all while continuing to attract commodity value. While it's not new to make "meta" art—i.e., art that references itself or its own media in creation; art which, metaphorically speaking, is irreducible, its own prime number—what *is* new, technologically speaking, is the availability of these materials as mediums or media specific to this moment in the time line of technologies; what is also new are the artists' inventions of, and with, these substances. If Burridge is "terraforming," Fan is "bioforming": Working with the subject itself—e.g., biological materials like urine or melanin—inside an artificial vessel—here glass—Fan demonstrates how the process of molten reforming captured by the vessel both (1) mimics and (2) is identical to a natural process undertaken, in this case, in the controlled environment of a glassblowing studio. If ethical translation frustrates the desire for establishing one-to-one meaning, then works like Fan's and Burridge's use biological and geological cognates neologically, creating new and transcendent visual vocabularies to address the complexities of current environments.

'fluid-rock.' This intervention upon the stone is one that remembers Melbourne's geologic past while also being an expression of our current geologic epoch, the Anthropocene." Quote transcribed from "Rivers and Streams 3: Terraform—Nic Burridge and Jason Waterhouse in conversation."

It's inaccurate, I think, to say that Fan's work is *like* rock; nor is it *about* geological or mineralogical or biological formations, in the same way it isn't *about* the body, or even about race. Fan's work *is* these things; it is composed of them, and it refigures them, recomposing and reassembling them from extracorporeal parts to trouble the surfaces and the boundaries between the things we call "real" (frequently and catastrophically mistaken for their false equivalent, the "biological") and that which we deem artificial. As a (meta-)commodity in the context of art world economics, Fan's melanin work—and, to a significant extent, much of his work with blood, hormones, and other bio-materials—functions in the realm of the analogue; which is to say that, in its association with transaction, money, currency, and commodity in the art world, the audience of Fan's work, myself included, participates in this process of meaning-making by paying for, or consuming, the commodity of *color* itself. As an enactment of colonial tectonics in the currency of everyday life, Fan's work acts as analogue for the commodification of bio-materials and the reentrenchment of racism in a moment that occupies a space—well?—truly *beyond* metaphor. So, what Fan's art draws out is our complicity in this commercial arrangement, no matter who we are; this consumption of race as rare gem, as geological bounty, as booty and as colonial artifact, as we replicate and reenact, reinvent and perform, continuously in gestures great and small, the extension of the conquistadorial-colonial process and the hierarchical conversion of color into capital.



Installation view, Nicholas Burridge's exhibition *Terraforming*, Melbourne Design Week, Living Museum of the West, 2021. Photo courtesy Nicholas Burridge



Jes Fan, glass globule with melanin, 2018.
Photo by Minü Han

It's October 2020. I'm making some headway in my search for what King calls a "better organizing metaphor." Though it may be composed of many of the same cosmic materials, the meteorite as it reaches us, I realize, is not of this earth. It hurtles down, perhaps as a larger meteor. Possibly it causes a mass extinction or destroys downtown LA; possibly it survives in concentrated little fragments of its prior mass—the amino acids and proteins of its past still preserved inside.⁴⁸ Yet regardless of its origins, as soon as it hits the earth, the meteorite joins the terrestrial economy, where it may gather enough conceptual momentum to carry it from crater site to amateur detectorist's home to eBay, perhaps even acquiring a sense of belonging as it circulates among collectors, scientists, and sculptors creating written works of art. Maybe in that sense the meteorite-as-metaphor is a kind of space amber, a marvered survivor of atmospheric trauma that preserves material from an ancient geome as it transitions from astral flotsam to alien bitcoin.

Nobody can predict where a meteorite will land. By contrast, the volcano is always tied to its locality. In the minds of those people who live in a volcano's blast zone, the volcano will have already erupted many times before it ever actually erupts. The eruption floods a thousand Pompeiis. In this way, the conceptual scope of the volcano-as-metaphor expands to encompass the past but also the present and the future too: It simultaneously

48. Apparently you can find meteorites in the Nullarbor by using a magnet. See Emily Finch, "5 rocks any great Australian rock collection should have, and where to find them," *The Conversation*, July 14, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/5-rocks-any-great-australian-rock-collection-should-have-and-where-to-find-them-163578>.

projects the future, obscures the present, and renders it the past. Only periodically does the volcano give us a reminder of the other pasts it contains, when it exposes a cliff face or forces up a rare tumuli lava blister. The model volcano, looking for a place to belong, artificially extends this metaphoric bridge across time, from geology into the realm of aesthetics.

This geologic language I've unearthed to make sense of my own surroundings, and of my inner terrain, opens its own magmatic apertures. My father's second *yahrzeit* is approaching. I think now I can gauge the dissociative depth of the subterranean chamber I've inhabited since that day on the train east from Peekskill: It's below the basalt. Is that why I'm still here? *How pretentious! How indulgent!* I cannot resist the temptation to gloss this writing experiment with a minor pyroclastic blast, to audition metaphors in the prelude to their own extinction, sucked out—no, shot out—from deep within the earth's core—forced out, in fragments and as random fall. Is it appropriate (I'm wondering) to talk about my tephra, my tuff? Or would that just be more junk shop ontogeny?

Tephraic lust! Or love lost! I keep thinking about it, I refuse to just let it go.

Volcanic sediment/sentiment,
 accumulated in layers,
 火山推積物.

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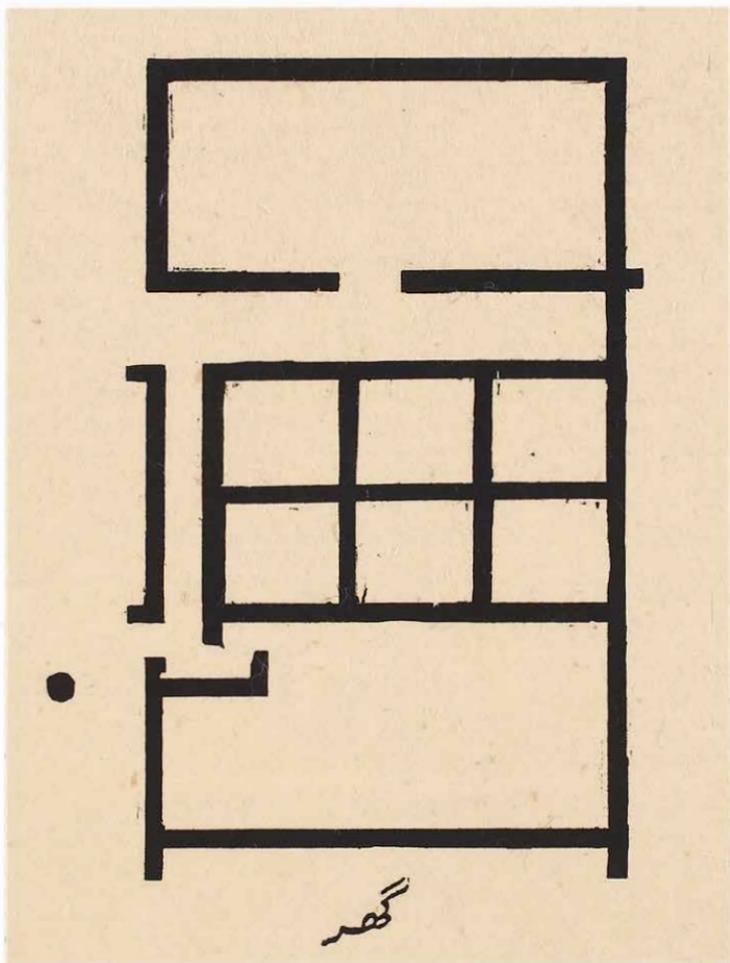
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Ari Larissa Heinrich is Professor of Chinese Media and Culture at the Australian National University. Heinrich has written on topics ranging from the history of medical photography and painting to the exhibition of cadavers in internationally circulating anatomical displays. They are also known for their translations of key works of queer literature from Taiwan such as Qiu Miaojin's *Last Words from Montmartre* (New York Review Books, 2014) and Chi Ta-wei's *The Membranes* (Columbia University Press, 2021). "Ejecta" is an entry in their book-length experimental glossary project, which has the working title "Decolonial Melanin."



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Home

Zarina 99

Front cover: Zarina, *Home*

from the portfolio *Home is a Foreign Place*, 1999

Portfolio of 36 woodcuts with Urdu text printed in black on

Kozo paper and mounted on Somerset paper

Edition of 25 and 5 Roman Numeral sets

Image size: 8 x 6 inches (20.32 x 15.24 cm)

Sheet size: 16 x 13 inches (40.46 x 33.02 cm)

© Zarina; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Photo: Farzad Owrang

Cookie Jar, a pamphlet series of the Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, gathers five new pieces of writing by grantees that take on home as the unruly site of inheritance, memory, and imagination. In “Ejecta,” Ari Larissa Heinrich reflects on artist Jes Fan’s melanin sculptures and the geology of metaphoric language. Tan Lin’s “The Fern Rose Bibliography” is a meditation on the loss of his parents through an olfactory exploration of his family’s books. M. Neelika Jayawardane’s “This is not the correct history” questions the evidentiary nature of documentary photography foregrounding the slippery ethics of reading images of the decades-long civil war in Sri Lanka. In “He Brought a Swastika to the Summer of Love,” William E. Jones closely reads the fascist iconography in the films of Kenneth Anger for their prescient, unnerving connections to our contemporary political moment. In “Racial Chain of Being,” Shaka McGlotten updates the chart of representations that was Donna Haraway’s provocation in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in the process forging connections between familial legacy, Black radicalism, and the classroom.

In her masterwork *Home is a Foreign Place* (1999)—from which we borrow the title for this volume and cover image for this volume—artist Zarina wrote, “The titles of my work always come to me before the image. Language ties my work together. Urdu is home.” Titled *Home*, this is the first of thirty-six woodblock prints that recall the artist’s childhood residence in Aligarh, India. Even a partial list of Zarina’s titles—*Threshold*, *Courtyard*, *Shadows*, *Fragrance*, *Despair*—reveal how the viewer is invited into the sensorium of Zarina’s elusive idea of home. The essays in this first volume of *Cookie Jar*, varied in scope and approach, illuminate the interior landscapes associated with home. Collectively, they demonstrate the fearlessness—and the tenderness—with which writing may yet encounter art.

—Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha



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Andy Warhol spent his weekends scouring flea markets, thrift stores, and estate sales for specific items like Navajo blankets, watches, and cookie jars. He collected 175 unique cookie jars in his lifetime, which depicted homes and animals, bodies and faces. When Claude Picasso asked Warhol in 1972 about his fascination with cookie jars, Warhol responded, “They’re time pieces.”

cookiejar.artswriters.org

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