

The More I Study Nature: Georgiana Molloy and the Code of Modernity

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As the twenty-first century unfolds amid growing concerns of climate change and related ecological disaster it becomes increasingly urgent that we uncover the deep logic (or illogic) of the ways that we inhabit and exploit the places in which we live. In 'The More I Study Nature: Georgiana Molloy and the Code of Modernity', I ask the reader (or audience) to consider the codes of knowledge and behaviour that we have inherited and that continue to propel our lives. These codes map, shape, calibrate and compute. They are often hidden, sometimes secret, but always present. There are wet codes and dry codes; they are algorithmic and linguistic, mathematical, biological, moral, legal, social and economic. These codes not only describe and control, they can also provide a key to the internal logic of how things work in the world.^[1]

My aim is to engender a greater awareness of both the existence of and mutability of these abstract imperatives in the hope that this will, in the face of present 'global crises such as warming and species decline', enable us to 'challenge the logics which determine the course of events.' This challenge requires us to decipher the codes by which we live so that we might consider our choices. In this paper I contemplate a way of being in the world that gives value both to an embodied experience of the environment we find ourselves in, and a conceptual understanding of the effect our presence has on that environment. This process of contemplation could also be described as a poetics of place. And a poetics of place, I suggest, can be explored via the code of performance.

To this end, the paper is offered as an Exhibit both of Natural Science and of Moral Sensibility. It is a monologue that shifts between enactment and commentary as it investigates fragments of a story from Australia's colonial archives, in this case, those relating to the botanical discovery of Western Australia. This form is inspired (ironically and self-reflexively) by nineteenth century displays of performative science

and is designed not only to encourage an affect-full, passionate involvement in the making of place, but also to facilitate a process of observation and critical analysis of the ways in which place is made and the consequences that might ensue. The paper maps the rhizomatic incursion of the code of Modernity across a colonial landscape through the figure of a woman, Georgiana Molloy.^[2] This biographical process taps the symbolic power of performance via a wide range of cultural inscriptions; personal letters, poetry, historical archives, contemporary music and artwork, movement, and costume, to explore how codes, secret or otherwise, drive our lived, bodily, historical and encultured experience of the places we inhabit. In doing this, it attempts to untangle some of the interlocking contingencies that underpin the kind of Australia we are currently experiencing and actively producing.

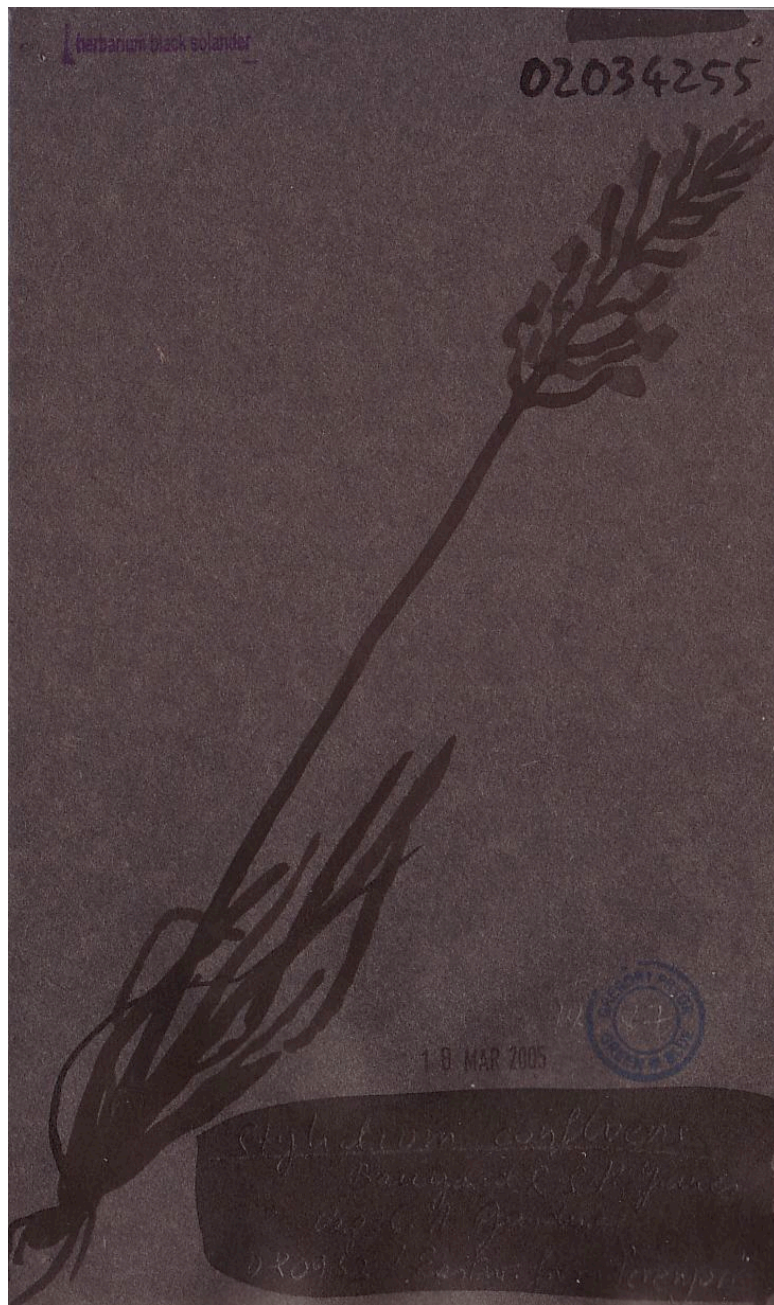
These emplaced cultural inscriptions combine in performance to activate notions of embodied *encounter* highlighting the creative potential of performance to re-imagine and re-model the complex systems that govern our relationships with nature and our ways of seeing and living in the world. The use of both enactment and commentary within the dramaturgical structure of the paper allows the *force* of affect and percept to be explicitly underlined by more conceptual and abstract notions of meaning-making. This interplay between the two modes operates within the understanding that while philosophy thinks abstractly, through concepts and making distinctions, art thinks through feelings and emotions, accessed by the body.^[3] These two ways of making meaning can come together in performance I suggest, within an emergent poetics of place.

My version of Georgiana Molloy's colonial story provides an example of embodied thinking or contemplation through action. I believe that such an embodied poetics demonstrates what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have described as the tendency of the English (or the English brand of philosophy to be more precise), to pitch a tent and inhabit a concept. The concept under consideration in Georgiana's personal history is the idea of Empire, and in this performance, it is the active inhabitation of a poetics of place. This approach marks and examines the dynamic

relationship between ways of knowing and ways of being in the world. Deleuze and Guattari write that

the English are precisely those nomads who treat the plane of immanence as a movable and moving ground, a field of radical experience, an archipelagian world where they are happy to pitch their tents from island to island and over the sea ... We cannot even say that they have concepts like the French and Germans; but they acquire them, they only believe in what is acquired – not because everything comes from the senses but because a concept is acquired by inhabiting, by pitching one's tent, by contracting a habit. They develop an extraordinary conception of habit: habits are taken on by contemplating and by contracting that which is contemplated. Habit is creative. The plant contemplates water, earth, nitrogen, carbon, chlorides, and sulphates, and it contracts them in order to acquire its own concept and fill itself with it (enjoyment*), [*original English]. The concept is a habit acquired by contemplating the elements from which we come ... We are all contemplations, and therefore habits. *I* is a habit. (1994: 105 original italics)

The poetics of place in performance that I advocate similarly pitches a tent in the middle of a concept or situation, inhabits it bodily and then proceeds by drawing on resources at hand and contemplating what best can be done. It acquires new ground through force of habit, contemplation and enjoyment of contingent circumstance. In this performance, I demonstrate how Georgiana, the historical woman, acquires new 'habits' and a new '*I*' in the 'field of radical experience' in her Colonial encounter within Empire. I suggest that as she observes the soil, the water, the flowers and seeds and the powers of 'fresh fructification' held within them, she is herself, contracted into the peculiar habits of her new environment and in the process, is transformed from a mere colonial export into a *becoming-flower*, a mutant indigene.^[4]



Gregory Pryor, Black Solander (detail), courtesy the artist and Lister Gallery.

A deadly paradox is also apparent in the parallel evolution that is Georgiana's becoming. I indicate in the paper that habits contracted in hybrid colonial environments which work to invigorate the dynamics of Empire, at the same time, cascade destruction upon the host environment. Georgiana's passion for flowers and her role in their categorisation within the Linnaean system of nomenclature helps

spread the code of Modernity across an Indigenous landscape, over-running and devastating a culture that has for aeons inhabited the land upon which she (literally and metaphorically) pitches her tent. I recommend that in an emergent and sustainable poetics of place, such destructive energy must be contemplated rationally, passionately and contracted peacefully.

Georgiana Molloy's fertile and/or virulent 'becoming' within the story of colonial expansion of Empire, provides an opportunity in twenty-first century Australia to contemplate the elements from which we come. This paper teases out some of the conflicting forces that reside in Georgiana's story and in positing a poetics of making, contemplates place through performance. It attains new ground by demonstrating in performance, the creative and active acquisition of *habit* through bodily inhabitation and thoughtful contemplation of an emerging concept. In this way, the 'place' created in this twenty-first century poetics of performance, is both a place to be and a place of which to be mindful. This mindfulness must also take into account untold, secret stories that might yet unfold. In this history there is much left unsaid and undocumented. In particular, further research needs to be undertaken to uncover the mysteries that surround the behaviour of John Molloy, Georgiana's husband, in order to explain the blood of the first people of the land that, some say, is still on his hands. But that is another story ... ^[5]

THE MORE I STUDY NATURE ^[6]

A lecture theatre or presentation space.

There is a chair set on one side of the space and a projection screen to the rear.

A slide show of images of Western Australian plants by artist Gregory Pryor begins to scroll.

Music by Steve Reich plays. (Music for 18 Musicians: Amadinda Percussion Group Live in Budapest. Hungaroton Records. 2003).

A Museum Guide enters.

She carries a folded, round, white lace tablecloth in one hand and the similarly round, collapsed skeleton frame of a white crinoline in the other.

She places the table cloth over the back of the chair and crinoline frame on the floor beside the chair.

She then collects a small wooden box and a roll of white paper masking tape. She kneels on the floor on the other side of the space from the chair, placing the box beside her. She takes the roll of masking tape and tapes out lines of a 12 square grid on the floor. When she has finished this task she goes to the centre of the space and compares the white grid with the white crinoline frame.

She addresses the audience.

The poet Mallarme says

Every man has a secret in him, many die without finding it and will never find it because they are dead, it no longer exists, nor do they. I am dead and risen again with the jeweled key of my last spiritual casket. It is up to me now to open it in the absence of any borrowed impression, and its mystery will emanate in a sky of great beauty. (Letter dated July 16, 1866)

Mallarme's secret is a code.

She returns to the grid, kneels in front of it and opens the box. The box is sectioned to contain 12 different bottles of seed. She begins to empty each bottle into one of the 12 white squares. As she does this she speaks.

The code describes reality, it also makes it. It is not the animating principle, but it animates. It is the machine that connects desire and an outcome that is always contingent, never inevitable. If we can understand our code, we have performed the right political act. ^[7]

She stands and crosses to the crinoline frame. She steps inside it, pulls it up and ties it around her waist.

This paper uses techniques of performance to trace the rhizomatic incursion of the code 'Modernity' across an alien landscape. It is embodied within the figure of a woman, Georgiana Molloy, and is revealed in observation of her far flung, colonial odyssey.

Georgiana Molloy leaves England in 1829 and arrives on the West coast of Australia in 1830, one of the first settlers of the new Swan River Colony. She is 24, pregnant and ready to colonize.

In her crinoline frame, she walks over to the seeds, kneels before the grid and carefully continues her distribution of seed across the 12 squares.

In time, she plants out a flower garden with seeds she has brought with her on the ship. Under the encouragement of the distant and mysterious botanist, Dr Mangles, she begins to collect native seeds and specimens. She dries presses and labels them and sends them back to Mangles at Kew Botanical Gardens. As they are placed within the Linnaean system and held within the confines of her own proto-Darwinian culture, their life in an Indigenous environment is uprooted, deterritorialized and for the most part, discarded.

She finishes the task and shuts the lid of the box. She speaks to the audience.

Over the next twelve years, Georgiana Molloy gives birth to seven children. She dies at 37 and is buried under the soil of her new country. Her five surviving

daughters thrive in the new colony. But this is not only a story of one person's appropriation of country and another's dispossession. Traces of Georgiana's passing (her letters to Dr Mangles at Kew Gardens sent along with the specimens of indigenous flora) document an entirely more subtle transformation. Imperceptibly, like grass growing (perhaps), the virgin bush works its own way upon this woman. On close inspection, her encounter with the natural world offers a strangely paradoxical example of what I call, a hopeful-becoming.

She goes to projection screen and inspects the images. Her body shape inclines toward the shapes of the plants. She turns back to address the audience.

Inspired by Georgiana's floral passion and by popular ethnographic and anthropological displays of the 19th century, I present Georgiana Molloy as an exhibit; a curiosity both of natural science and of moral sensibility.

This exhibit also draws on the inscriptions of others. I would particularly like to acknowledge the images of West Australian flora by artist, Gregory Pryor, music by American composer, Steve Reich, a forthcoming poem by 19th Century, Romantic poet, William Cowper, and of course the writings of Georgiana herself.

Before we meet Georgiana I would like to acknowledge the Indigenous people upon whose land she settled and of my own country. I live at the mouth of the Swan River in Western Australia, in Fremantle, the port where Georgiana first disembarked. The local people of the Swan River Valley are the Nyungar. Nyungar country stretches right across the South West corner of Australia from Jurien Bay in the north, down to Esperance in the south. Georgiana settled on Nyungar country. The Nyungar were here when she first set up camp in Fremantle and then travelled down South and built a settlement at Augusta. They were here when she later took up pastoral leases and built a homestead

on the Vasse River. Some say the Nyungar have been living in what is now known as a biodiversity hot spot, for well over 60,000 years.

Picks up box and walks briskly around (circumnavigates) the performance space...

The Swan River Settlement was projected from the Colonial Office in London in 1828. In March, 1830, before many dwellings were erected or land surveyed, fifty ships with 2,000 emigrants, bringing property amounting to £1,000,000, arrived in the newly seeded colony on the West Coast of Australia.

Stands on chair.

Among those tempted to cross 12,000 miles of ocean, was Captain John Molloy, otherwise known as 'handsome Jack', an officer, wounded at the battles of Waterloo and Trafalgar, and his much younger bride, Georgiana. It is of their experience that the following letters tell.

Holds the box under her arm and looks out at the flailing sea. She is buffeted by the ocean's swell.

The hollow dash of waves! The ceaseless roar!
Silence, ye bellows! Vex my soul no more.
Shroud my green land no more, thou blinding spray!
Give way! –the booming surge, the tempest's roar,
The sea-birds wail, shall vex my soul no more!
Her very heart athirst –
To gaze at Nature in her green array,
Upon the ship's tall side she stands, possess'd
With visions prompted by intense desire;
Fair fields appear below, such as she left.

Georgiana gets off chair and surveys the new country.

Far distant, such as she would die to find
-She seeks them headlong ...

She sits on the chair. She has the box on her lap and contemplates the scene.

My dear Mary

I can give you no idea of the open state of regardless wickedness that reigns here. Molloy ordered an observance of the Sabbath from the first of our arrival. Prayers are read and a sermon or Homily, but even that is thought tedious. These last two Sundays he had read one of Binder's Village Sermons, but all is heard as if not heard; and the soldiers' wives who are compelled to attend or to go without their rations, very often quit the service in the middle of it to hold their inebrious orgies.

She places the box on the ground beside her. She spreads out the lace tablecloth at her feet.

This is certainly a very beautiful place; but were it not for domestic charms, the eye of the emigrant would soon weary of the unbounded limits of thickly clothed, dark green forests.

I am sitting on the verandah surrounded by my little flower garden of British and Australian flowers pouring forth their odour.

(Gets up, goes to centre of table cloth.)

A variety of beautiful little birds most brilliant in plumage sport around me. There is a small bird called the Australian robin, with the breast of a very bright scarlet; *(puts hand up as though bird is perching on it)* also a little bird of a complete blue colour resembling cobalt, with short green wings.

She puts her other hand up to observe the small bird more closely. Her body now is held in a gesture that prefigures Georgiana's movements later in the piece when she (becomes) takes on the shape of the projected flower images.

She observes the birds on her hands and then looks about her.

The honey eaters are so minutely beautiful I cannot describe them.

She addresses the audience.

Georgiana observes. You observe me 'performing' Georgiana observing. You observe the code of performance. A short note about the act of observation;

Michel Foucault says:

To observe then, is to be content with seeing – with seeing few things systematically, with seeing what, in the rather confused wealth of representation, can be analyzed, recognized by all, and thus given a name that everyone will be able to understand. ^[8]

Tip toes around the edge of the cloth looking at the tiny flowers.

A remarkable feature in the botany of S.W. Australia, is the numerous kinds of leaves with the identical flower. I know one purple pea flower with three different kinds of leaves, one of which is a creeper, and called ... the blue vine; the other an erect shrub with no smell and leaves like ... holly; the third is also erect, with leaves like ... the privet, and in shady places the blossoms emit a scent about three in the afternoon like allspice or cloves.

...but I fear this last page may be somewhat tedious, as you are not likely to behold all these ... aborigines.

Are you observing? Are you deciphering the code?

Because on the other hand, Gilles Deleuze says “something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter”. [9]

She picks up box and goes over to the grid.

Unlike mere observation, the encounter challenges and disrupts our habitual way of seeing, it transforms us.

So, I invite you not only to observe but also via the Code of Performance, to experience and hopefully, to encounter Georgiana Molloy and her transforming Code of ... Modernity.

She looks at the box as if it is a new discovery.

My Dear Dr Mangles – Much to my surprise in December last, I received a particularly choice box of seeds, and your polite note requesting a return of the native seeds of Augusta.

She kneels at the grid and with a tiny wooden scoop carefully begins to put a selection of a few seeds into small plastic bags.

We have already collected some seeds as your box arrived just at the proper season. I am not even acquainted with the names of the native plants. I will, however, enclose a leaf and description of the flower in each paper.

In truth, my dear Sir, I have no hesitation in declaring that, were I to accompany the box of seeds to England, knowing as I do their situation, time of flowering, soil and degree of moisture required and powers of fresh fructification they each possess, I should have a very extensive conservatory of no plants but from Augusta.

I do not say this vauntingly, but to inspire you with that ardour and interest with which the collection leaves me.

She stops what she is doing, closes the lid of the box and picks it up. She puts it down stage centre. It becomes the coffin of her dead baby. She retrieves the table cloth that is still lying on the floor. As she speaks, she folds the cloth carefully, never taking her eyes from the small coffin.

Forgive me Dear Sir ... using towards a stranger, the freedom and minute detail that friendship warrants and desires ...

Under the afflicting decree ... recently been overwhelmed ... loss of our darling infant ... drowning!!

... been playing with him and ... frolicsome mood just after breakfast, ... preparing to bake and churn... left dear little Johnny ... seen him with Mary, and near his Papa,... had his bell on (a little bell he wore around his waist ... straying in the bush.) ... not finding him, 'Have you been to the Well?' ... 'Do not frighten yourself, he never goes there'!!

... going to the Well. The fatal truth ... "here's the Boy" ... his flaxen curls all dripping, his little countenance so ... we knew not what to do.

... that lively, healthy child ...all mirth and joyousness ... beautiful and lovely even in death.

Puts folded cloth on top of box.

I now enclose your box and letter. So many of its contents were collected under the extremes of joy and acute sorrow. It has beguiled many a moment, and I hope you will receive most success and satisfaction in sowing your seed.

Any particular seed you desire and those I have imperfectly been able to transmit, I shall feel happy against another season to repair.

P. S. If the box you send me is large enough, a watering pot would be of the greatest use to us as ours are worn and destroyed after eight years service.

With every kind wish, I remain very sincerely yours. Georgiana Molloy.

Georgiana goes back to the grid. She inspects the grouping of seeds, touching each section.

Dear Dr Mangles. Words fail me when I attempt to return you my many many grateful thanks and acknowledgements for 'your box's' useful, beautiful and handsome contents.

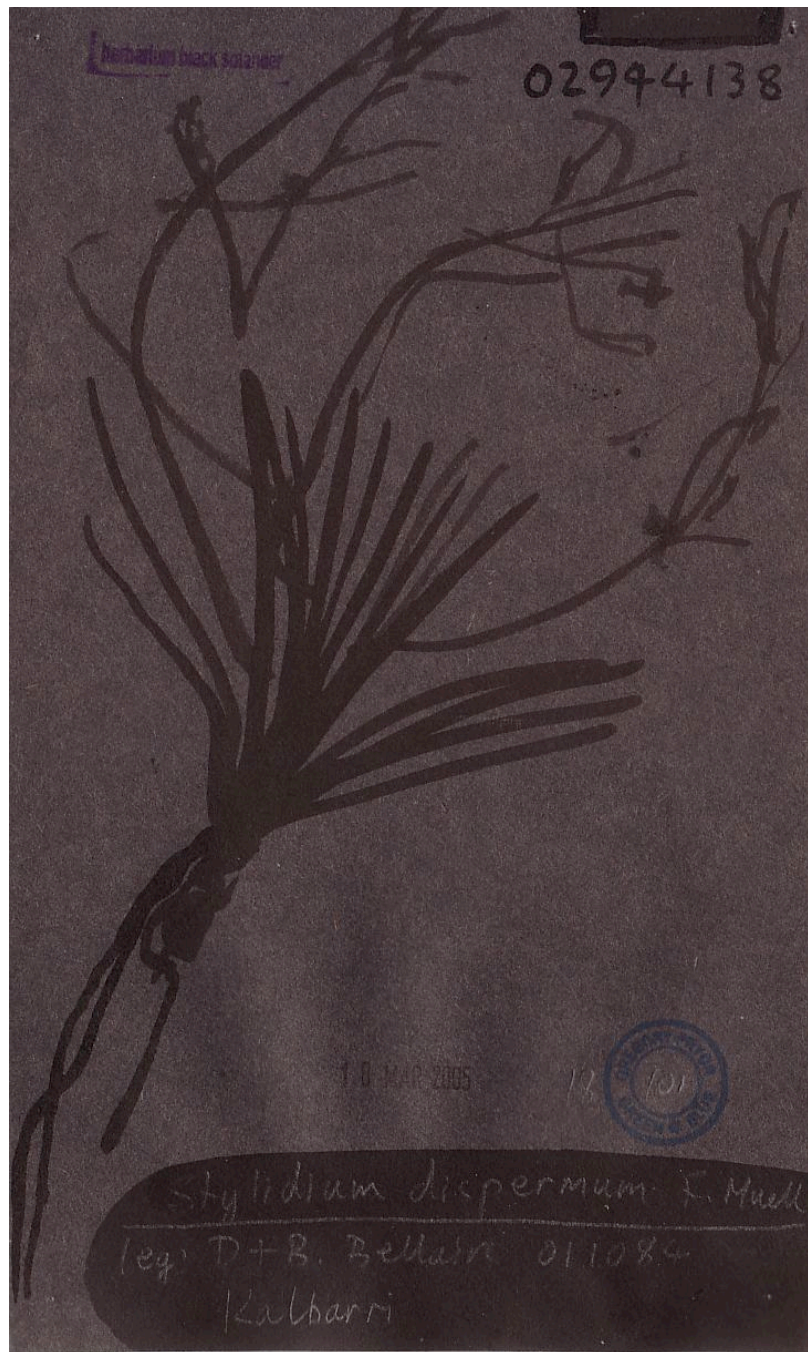
I shall with unfeigned pleasure attempt to gratify you in writing the Floral Calendar, I will glean all I can, and pray my health may be so recruited as to permit of my making those much enjoyed Floral excursions.

Finally she runs her hand through the seeds, wantonly mixing them across the squares of the grid.

Such flowers of imagination; I am now in raptures when I think on them.

When I sally forth on foot or Horseback, I feel quite elastic in mind and step; I feel I am quite at my own work, the real cause that enticed me out to Swan River.

Using the scoop, she begins packaging the seeds up into the little plastic bags again. She works quickly and with concentrated intensity.



Gregory Pryor, Black Solander (detail), courtesy the artist and Lister Gallery.

I have been four times out in search of Nyutsia and send you the small, small harvest. The seed is really very difficult to obtain if not there the day it ripens. The quantity speaks for itself. I have twice sent a native, once a white man and native, gone four times out myself, twice with a servant and twice with Molloy, and yet as you see the Result!

My two remaining children have really been of great utility, their eyes being so much nearer the ground, they have been able to detect many minute specimens and seeds I could not observe. For in our impervious bush it is really difficult to find what you are in quest of.

I have not sent you every flower we have worth sending, and many I fear you will consider worthless, but having obeyed the 'Golden Rule' I have ventured to introduce some literal weeds. Often in hearing of foreign countries, I have wished to be acquainted with their most common plants, having more curiosity to see its weeds than the finer production.

In this most uncultivated land and temperate climate, insects and reptiles have unrestrained license, and the seeds of each plant afford sustenance to some of the animal creation. Consequently, the seed vessels of each are generally inhabited by some worm or grub. This is particularly the case with those contained in a silique. I had several large quantities of number 67, 71, 73, 85, to gather and open before I could meet with the small packages I send to you. I have minutely examined every seed and know they are sound and fresh, as they have all been gathered from 15 December 1837 to the present day.

Georgiana stops her activity and stands to survey the grid now covered in a confusion of seed. She walks right around it and then moves toward the screen projected with images of flowers.

I came on an open plain of many acres in extent with scarcely a tree on it, and those that grew, were large and fine. I discovered a plant I had been almost panting for.

She moves in front of the projection screen, she observes the images closely. She puts her hands toward them and imitates the shapes of the tree and its flowers. She turns toward the audience still in the shape of the tree. She observes her body.

I beheld a tree of great beauty, dark green and prickly. Its flowers gave character not only to the tree itself, but to the surrounding locality. They are of the purest white and fall in long trusses from the stem. Some of its pendulous blooms are from three to five fingers in length.

These wave in the breeze like snow wreaths and are of such a downy white appearance. They emit a most delicious perfume resembling the bitter almond;

...like all mortal delicacies, how quick these flowers fall from the stalk!

Her movements slow to a stop. Her arms are outstretched in the flower shape. It is though she is in suspended animation, dried and pressed as a specimen.

In all my illness and real suffering, I did not forget you. As Spring approached I lamented not being able to gather the flowers as they came out.

Once Molloy in kangaroo hunting brought me a bouquet of beautiful scarlet flowers also dried and which please God I ever get about again I shall mark and send.

I was surprised during my illness to receive a nosegay from a native who was aware of my floral passion. These too are under preparation for you.

I finally conclude and as always, remain most sincerely yours, Georgiana Molloy.

Her arms drop to her sides.

Deleuze might say: this woman is a becoming-flower.

She goes to the grid and picks up a package of seeds. She holds them up and shows them to the audience.

A code.

She indicates the projected images.

Another code.

She indicates the music and her costume.

Another code.

Hands out seed bags to audience.

All codes of performance.

Goes back to the performance space.

The poet Mallarme says

Every man has a secret in him, many die without finding it.

Undoes the crinoline and lets it fall.

Georgiana Molloy's floral passion provides a jewelled key to the spiritual casket that Mallarme imagines. The encoded secrets of her life are revealed in her bodily, lived encounters with her new environment, encounters that rupture her, crack her like an egg, like a seed perhaps, out of which new and unexpected intensities of life emerge. She may well be considered a flower, she might perhaps be judged a weed, but even now, the mysteries of her life of encounter continue to emanate into the world.

Indicates the performance space.

All of us, in which ever corner of burgeoning modernity we inhabit may ask ourselves; weeds or flowers, are we content merely to observe, to 'see what can be analysed, recognized by all, and thus given a name that everyone will be able to understand.' Or are we like Georgiana, willing not only to observe, but also to risk ourselves in encounter, to be guided by our passions and live our lives as a hopeful-becoming.

Thank you.



Gregory Pryor, Black Solander (detail), courtesy the artist and Lister Gallery.

NOTES

1. This articulation and application of the idea of 'Code' is formulated in response to a call for papers for the 21'st Annual Conference for the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts, held in 2007 in Portland, Maine. The quotes below refer to the text in the call for papers for this edition of Performance Paradigm.
2. A rhizome is not easily containable; it is by its very nature nomadic as it runs opportunistically in any direction it can find a footing. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome spreading across culture is constitutionally different from the root, radical or tree; it 'ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles' (1987: 7).
3. Writing of the action of affect and percept and their connection to the body, Deleuze and Guattari note that
what is called 'perception' is no longer a state of affairs but a state of the body as induced by another body, and 'affection' is the passage of this state to another state as increase or decrease of potential-power through the action of other bodies'. (1994: 154)
4. Molloy, Georgiana. 1805-1843. Letter to Dr Mangles, Jan 25, 1838. Diaries, 1 January 1830-9.
5. In 1897 W.B. Kimberly publishes his account of a punitive expedition that went out in 1841 in which
one of the most bloodthirsty deeds ever committed by Englishmen is reported to have taken place. No records exist of this affair, and the narrative depends on the evanescent memories of pioneers, and the statements of several surviving natives of that period, particularly Weelah, of the Vasse tribe. (115 – 116)
These memories are recorded by Kimberly as a vivid account of a sustained and brutal manhunt in which
Colonel (captain) Molloy ordered his soldiers to prepare to march, and he took command of them and the chief settlers in the south-western districts

... Into the remote places this party went ...The white men had no mercy. The black men were killed by dozens, and their corpses lined the route of march of the avengers. Then the latter went back satisfied. (1897: 116)

6. The material in the performative section of this paper relating to Georgiana Molloy is taken from a range of sources, including Molloy's own letters and diaries which are held and readily accessible in microfilm at the Battye Library, Western Australia (479A/1-2), the books by Lines and Husluck listed in the bibliography, from the archives of the Western Australian Historical Society and from other unpublished research. Georgiana's monologue is taken verbatim from these letters and diaries but is edited by me and not necessarily presented chronologically. Similarly the poem she recites at the beginning of the monologue is edited from 'A Voyager's Dream of Land', by William Cowper. This poem is published in the front of 'Marshall's Ladies Fashionable Repository for 1829', a book that is also Georgiana's personal diary, and contains other songs and poems, advertising material, shipping news and public notices.
7. I have adapted Deleuze's complex notion of the abstract machine to the more straight forward function of a code. In his Masterclass; 'Understanding Deleuze' held at Edith Cowan University in July, 2006, Ian Buchanan commented that if we can understand our abstract machine, we have done the right political act.
8. Foucault in Sartiliot (1993: 41).
9. Deleuze in O'Sullivan (2006: 1)

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