

## Finding Children of Compost Symbionts. An exploration of hopes and care in the damaged world

Clara M.Y. Chan

RMIT University, Australia

[clarachan808@hotmail.com](mailto:clarachan808@hotmail.com)

### Abstract

This project explores the use of simple craft techniques as resistance, and is a response to Haraway's call for "collaborative and divergent story-making practice" in her *Camille Stories: Children of Compost* (2016). I use compost as a figuration that articulates life in the damaged world. Living is composting. This project seeks to inspire curious and open thinking, and to build a "dialogical bridge between knowledge systems" (Rose, 2020). Through the agency of my Children of Compost Symbionts (an organism living in symbiosis with another), this project aims to engage the public in constructive public discourse in order to find hope, care and empathy in the broken world. The symbionts appropriate traditional handcrafted toys, like dolls and bears, and work in the way that psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott called "transitional objects" (Levy, 2021) work for children: they carry our anxieties, rage, love, and most secret thoughts, and live the life on our behalf. These whimsical symbionts inspire the public to tell their own stories of remediation and repair, encourage the public to create new perspectives and approaches, and engage with a multiplicity of otherness ethically.

**Keywords:** symbiont, craft, compost, care, empathy

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Figure 1: photograph taken at Mullum Mullum Reserve, Melbourne. Photo by author, 2020.

### **Introduction: Collaborative Story Making**

This project emerged as a response to Donna Haraway’s call for “collaborative and divergent story-making practice” (2016) amidst prevailing ecological problems. Environmental scientists like Gerardo Ceballos suggest we are entering the sixth mass extinction (2015). As ecological ethnographer Debroah Bird Rose claims “we are no longer in the position of being able to sustain the idea that humans are separate from nature” (2020). But how can we relinquish anthropocentrism, conjoin human and nonhuman, and identify alternative futures?

The first phase of this project started when the Covid-19 pandemic first hit Australia in 2020. I was then socially distanced from other human beings, but this opened a window for reconnecting with all other living beings around me. I hear them, feel them and love them, therefore must care for them. The desire to materialise “becoming-with all that is other-than-human” (Haraway, 2016) started the inception of my Children of Compost Symbionts. They were born to carry us into an exploration of love, care and hope in a world where Bios (life of humans) and Zoe (the non-human, vital force of life) can co-exist in a sustainable and just way. As stated by Braidotti (2019), Bios is regulated by sovereign powers and rules, whereas Zoe is unprotected and vulnerable. This journey started in my home studio with limited resources. I handmade doll-like symbionts that are part human and part nonhuman. My intention is that the human part of the symbiont is “materially embedded and embodied, differential, affective and relational” as Braidotti (2019) puts it.



Figure 2: Lichen Symbiont quilt and fruticose lichen collage, 2021. Lichen photos from open source.

The non-human part is vibrant and powerful. Together with my symbionts, I am interested in how we can creatively explore the potential for building a more just and sustainable way of life on a planet with finite resources and vitality through new symbiotic stories. Going into the second phase of this project, I incorporated lichen with animal cross human forms. As an exploration, the Children of Compost Symbionts take on many forms such as in the third phase of this project, I created a series of symbiont posters and tote bags, and later flags, quilts and video works, to raise awareness to environmental degradation, mass extinction, and climate change through these diverse public interventions. Throughout this ongoing project, I explore different possibilities of inspiring reflection and discourse on environmental and ecological justice through the agency of the symbionts.

### **First Generation Symbiont Team**

These small experimental sculptures-symbionts articulate the relationship between human and non-human. In these soft sculptures that I call my Children of Compost Symbionts, I assembled elements from all beings around me, including human, flora and fauna into non-hierarchical entities. I constructed the symbionts to explore how an ethics of joy might conflate mutually exclusive/exhaustive binarizations, such as human/animal, mind/body, reason/passion, idea/passion and male/female. Such ethics refuse the normative and familiar, resisting being conflated with standards and “universal principles of thought and action” according to Grosz (2017). Additionally, through distorting the binaries, these symbionts carry us on a diffractive journey (a deviation in the direction) in search of new ethics, meanings and knowledge.





Figure 3: First Generation Symbiont Team, 2020, steel wire, fabric, feathers, dried wild flowers, polyester wadding, 1 x 46cm x 30cm x 19cm; 1 x 56cm x 14cm x 10cm; 1 x 45cm x 12 cm x 10cm; 1 x 46cm x 25cm x 25cm. Photo by author.

I started making the first-generation symbionts in the middle of the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 when public space was inaccessible, while anxiety, economic hardship, and social injustice dominated the public discourse. The poor must keep working under health threats while the privileged can isolate from infection. Escape from reality becomes a way to reflect and recoup in order to come back and improve the broken systems.



Figure 4 & 5 Photography taken at Mullum Mullum trail, Melbourne, Australia 2020. Photo by author.

Many contemporary artists are facilitating the escape for meaningful outcomes. The fantastic Yayoi Kusama, for example, is tirelessly bringing us to the infinite unbound universe and back. Artists like Raul De Nieves open the door of wonder and play with his shiny, bejewelled paintings and sculptures, while Cao Fei transports us to virtual

reality.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, my whimsical symbionts inspire stories that transform anxiety and despair into new possibilities and new knowledge. With a background in fashion and textile technology, and a life-long love of making with my hands, sewing and embroidery naturally become my creative tools. What is traditionally considered women's craft in both western and eastern cultures turned into my best medium to dismantle traditional separations between fine art and craft, human and non-human, culture and nature, ecology and humanity. The time and effort put into my craft practice is a metaphor of love and care through which new perspectives and knowledge emerge.

I presented the first-generation symbionts along Mullum Mullum trail (a historical and nature-based walk in the outer eastern suburbs in Melbourne, Australia) as a public installation. These playful symbionts were predominately human, incorporating some elements from nature. Haraway (2008) observes that the "joy of play breaks rules to make something else happens." This small accomplishment in finding "joy of play" pushed me to carry this project forward until I had a breakthrough when I found lichen.

### **Lichen Symbionts**

Lichen represents perfectly the movement within compost that involves trampling, inhaling, exhaling, making room and taking space. They are biological collaborations between a fungus and a photosynthetic organism, and they "render each other capable" (Haraway, 2016). Using lichen as the main body of the sculptures allows me to question "species hierarchy and Anthropocentric exceptionalism" (Braidotti, 2019) while suggesting a new way of posthuman thinking within affirmative ethics. Lichens are very sensitive to pollution and changes in temperature and humidity. Scientists have long been successfully using lichens as ecological indicators or environmental health thermometers. Through injecting this health indicator into my symbionts, I intend to inspire hope and the possibility of a sustainable future and become a force to reject dystopia.

### **Extinction Quilt**

In this iteration I presented the lichen symbionts on a handmade *Extinction* quilt, on which names of extinct species in the last one hundred years are embroidered. Informed by textile works of Faith Ringgold, Gunes Terkol and Nilbar Gures, I stitched the name of extinct species on the quilt as protest, and applied the symbionts on the quilt as my resistance action in response to environmental degradation. The symbionts are far from being perfect or pretty. Their uneven limbs and disfigured bodies not only embodied our broken system but also embedded the art and beauty of "living with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Fei's documentary "Imirror" (2007) was filmed entirely in Second Life. Ferrando, Francesca. "A Feminist Genealogy of Posthuman Aesthetics in the Visual Arts." Palgrave communications 2, no. 1 (2016).



Figure 6: Extinction Quilt: Symbiosis and Metamorphoses, 2021, digital printed fabric, polyester wadding, and embroidery thread, 2 x 35cm x 47cm. Photo by author.



Figure 7: Extinction Quilt #3, 2021, fabric, polyester wadding, knitting yarn and acrylic paint, 120cm x 180cm. Photo by author.





Figure 8: Part of Extinction Quilt #3, 2021, 120cm x 180cm. Photo by author.

### Climate Crisis Paste-up

In another iteration I created posters to reflect on the climate crisis to challenge and expand our ecological consciousness. I created the lichen symbionts to represent a positive relationship to the diversity of non-human life in a non-hierarchical manner, recognizing the respective degrees of intelligence, ability, and creativity of all organisms (Braidotti, 2019). Through juxtaposing the non-hierarchical symbionts with human-caused disastrous events, I intend to invite discourse around environmental justice and post-anthropocentrism.

To exemplify the urgent need for changes, I used 2019-20 Eastern Victorian bushfires and 2018-19 Murray-Darling basin fish death crisis as the backgrounds of the posters. By superposing the symbionts on top of the calamity, this cast a sense of hope and care in times of crisis. Finally, I changed the background images to black and white, signifying the historical implication of these events, which record the negative impacts of heedless human actions that upset the ecological balance.

### Poster Totes

Referencing the "guerrilla kindness" of Sayraphim Lothian (2018), the symbiont posters were digitally printed on tote bags to be gifted away in the public area. These totes became mobile posters moving with the owners, and in return, the owners receive the service of storage and transport. What an excellent productive and co-constitutive relationship! The intrinsic down-to-earth nature of the tote bag carries the narrative further and broader into the public. It gently invades hearts and effortlessly generates discourse and reflection on human and non-human entanglement.

The tote gifting act happened at the intersection of Victoria Street and Cardigan Street in Carlton, an inner-city suburb of Melbourne, on June 2021. I wore a dress that said

*Finding Children of Compost Symbionts*

"care, Free, empathy" at the front, and printed "Adopt a symbiont poster tote, Free, please bring the symbiont to the public and transform the ruined universe by imagination and proposition of stories" at the back, while gifting totes to the public.

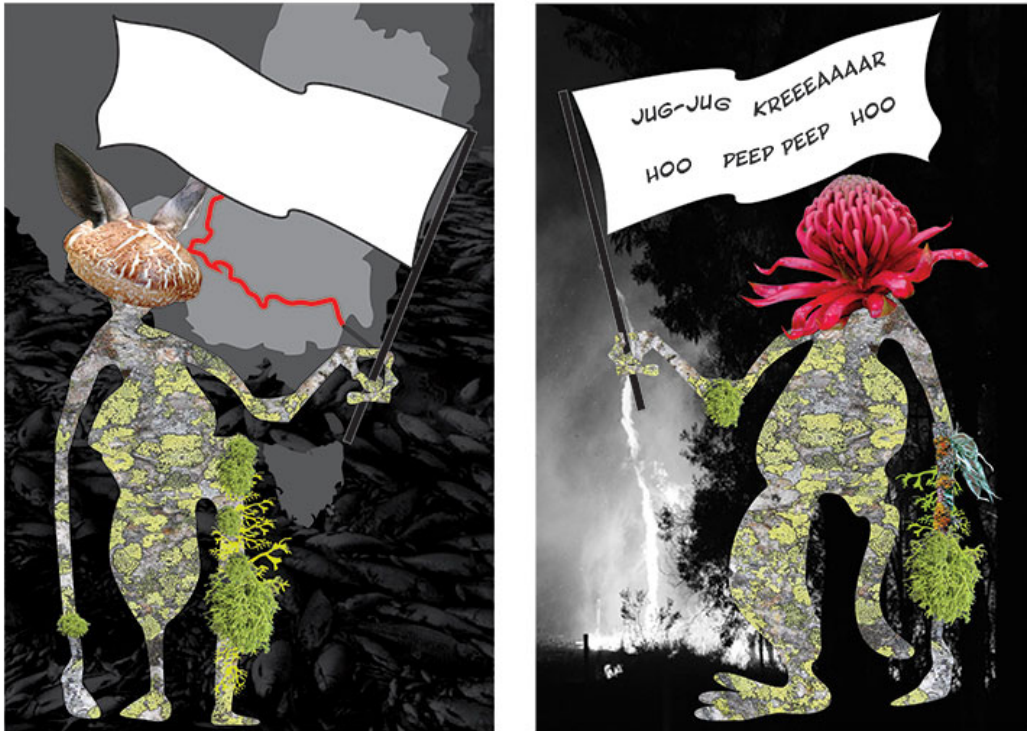


Figure 9: Climate Crisis Posters, 2021.



Figure 10: Tote gifting act, 2021 at Carlton, Australia. Photo by Billy Raffin.



**“Instructions for public spaces....unusual times”, The Public Space Museum in Bologna, 2021.**

My Children of Compost Symbionts travelled from Australia to Italy through the project “Instructions for public spaces....unusual times”. This project was a collaboration between the Public Space Museum, Bologna Italy, RMIT School of Art, Master of Arts – Art in Public Space, Melbourne, Australia and the London Metropolitan University’s Master of Public Art and Performance, UK. The concept was to create a Covid-19 response to public space in these unusual times through participating artists offering creative instructions to people.



Figure 11: Installation view of Instructions for public space...unusual times, 2021, Public Space Museum, Bologna, Italy, hosted by City Space Architecture. Photo by Luisa Bravo.

My climate crisis posters were part of the collective projection artwork at the central city Public Space Museum site in Bologna. The Public Space Museum is the first Italian research centre entirely dedicated to collaborative and transdisciplinary approach to public space practice, merging art, architecture and technology into a complex new discipline. The site itself merges exterior public space and the interior space of the museum through its glass interface.

### **Huaniao Island Public Art Festival Installation – *Finding Children of Compost***



Figure 12: Installation view on Huaniao Island, China, 2021. Source: Sherry Liu

From Italy to China and the Huaniao Island Public Art Festival 2021. Huaniao Island is a quiet and picturesque island approximately four hours by boat from Shanghai. It's small and aging community lives within a distinctive ecosystem and a traditional fishing culture undergoing social/economic changes brought about by the introduction of the tourist industry. The challenges imposed on environmental and cultural preservation are immanent. The rich ecosystem of the Zhoushan Archipelago, where Huaniao sits, houses many endangered species, namely the tree species *Carpinus Putoensis*.<sup>2</sup> This festival was a pilot project to engage artists and the public in creative placemaking to revitalize the culture and economy of this place.

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://arbnet.org/integrated-conservation-unique-flora-zhoushan-archipelago-china>



Figure 13: Installation view on Huaniao Island, China, 2021. Photo by Sherry Liu.

I extended my Finding Children of Compost project into this art installation embedding the same concept of questioning anthropocentrism and the impacts of advanced capitalism within it. I installed a group of vibrant flags with whimsical symbionts printed on them. The flags were animated by wind blowing from the sea. Eight colourful flags were installed along the seashore line. Another five flags sat a bit lower on the boats behind the front row of flags. They gave audiences a closer encounter with the symbionts. I mixed Zhoushan Archipelago-specific species with indigenous Australian elements to build the Huaniao symbiont league. The intention was to welcome and introduce Huaniao Island visitors to a non-hierarchical multispecies encounter. The work aimed to provoke the sense of wonder that dissipates boundaries and stands to build relationships, incite collective thinking in nature/culture preservation, and inspire systematic changes in the current time of the Anthropocene.

### **Posthuman Confluence Installation**

After the Huaniao Island project, my next installation artwork consisting of three extinction quilts, crocheted lichens, and a short video forms a summary of earlier iterations of the Children of Compost Symbionts. Extinction quilts from a previous project are re-made into two full-size single bed quilts, and a plain quilted panel as a video screen. At the centre of the installation, a video tells the story of my resonance with microbes, mushrooms, and kitchen tools. Through preparing a meal with the lichen and mushroom, I aim to articulate my integrated relationship with other species and matters. I put on the lichen gloves to represent my symbiotic relationship with all the microbes inside me. This relationship is complicated; some microbes make me sick, but most of the time, the microbes provide vital functions essential for my survival. One of



the essential partnerships is food consumption, an important part of the ecosystem. Through the performance, I aspire to tell the story of a partnership (between all-other-beings and me) based on mutual respect and understanding by making a meal with mushroom, lettuce, capsicum, lemon, oil, knife, fork, bowls, and plates. My respect and care towards these non-human partners are projected through my body movement and the food presentation.



Figure 14: Installation view at Mullum Mullum trail, Melbourne, 2021. Photo by author.

This artwork was set up in outdoor public parkland filled with gumtrees, native grass, flowers, clear air, soft breeze, birds, insects, rabbits, koalas, possums, and human passers-by. The quilts were animated by nature through the wind and by songs of birds. My Children of Compost Symbionts invited all Bios and Zoë to join, telling their stories, rediscovering the connection with each other, and finding meanings in the entanglement. I sum up this work with Braidotti's (2019) words: "What is inexhaustible is the potential that all living organisms share for multiple actualizations of yet unexplored interconnections, across and with human and non-human."

### Going Forward

The relationship between human and non-human is complex and dynamic. To articulate this relationship, I use needles, threads, fabric, and simple craft techniques to construct my whimsical Children of Compost Symbionts; and then deploy them to inspire creative

story making, to facilitate constructive public discourse, to raise awareness to environmental degradation, mass extinction, and climate change, and to encourage new perspectives and knowledge.

Lichen was used as the main element of the symbionts to signify human “becoming-with all that is other-than-human” (Haraway, 2016). The symbionts progressively embed and embody more elements from the universe with every additional artwork being made. The connection between humans and other beings is neither linear nor limited. The more I work on this project, the more lives and matters I discover and re-discover. I have told my love stories with non-human through the symbionts and will continue to work with the symbionts to inspire the public to create new possibilities of co-existence with all-other-beings.

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*Finding Children of Compost Symbionts*

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