



Fig. 1 Heather Hesterman, *Conspire*, 2021, digital print. Photo © Heather Hesterman

Walking in Merri Circles

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Walking as a form of mobility—in terms of getting from point A to point B—is an efficient action with many benefits. From birth, it is one of the fundamental milestones in human development. Parents await the acquisition of this skill with anticipation and excitement, as their offspring moves from crawling on all fours to being vertical in the world. Balancing with supports progresses to standing on two feet, with walking and running permitting movement in any direction at will. Walking enables freedom of movement and thought.



Fig. 2 Merri Creek, Melbourne. Both locally endemic and European plant species are thriving. Photo © Heather Hesterman 2020

Verticality coupled with mobility is an evolutionary advantage, enabling humans to locate and position themselves in relation to their surroundings. An upright posture achieves clear sight lines into the distance. Perhaps, by raising our heads closer to the sky, we have inadvertently contributed to our gradual separation from the ground, soil and also

living creatures? Gazing into an abstract sky has perhaps led to forming thoughts of heavenly beings, floating in a world beyond dirt and decomposing leaf litter, whereby they whisper to us of another, better life than our corporeal one on earth. Perhaps many of us have forgotten that we too are nature; we too are part of this world, reliant on species and forms other than human for survival: trees, fish, soil, fungus, compost, air, animals and water (Haraway). We are enmeshed and complicit, in the way we are also entangled, unpredictable, clever, complex, stupid and amazing, just like other organisms. Every action has a consequence, no matter how big or small.

Meteorologist Edward Lorenz's 'butterfly effect' considers that the movement of air produced by the flapping of a butterfly's wings can have unpredictable results (Vernon). In borrowing from the future, extractive techniques have exploited peoples and lands, depleting resources resulting in species and ecosystems collapse. We humans have brought monstrous effects into play. Are we the monsters? Or mindless zombies unable to change our behaviour? Timothy Morton suggests we are zombies, or "a component of a zombie despite my will. Again, every time I start my car I'm not meaning personally to destroy lifeforms—which is what 'destroying Earth'

actually means” (35). Still, scaled up to a planetary level, millions of us daily are contributing to CO₂ levels by driving our cars, myself included¹. And yet here we are in the Anthropocene, an epoch defined by human induced changes, witnessing the obliteration of the planet’s life forms and systems. We are living through the Sixth Mass Extinction Event. The disaster films that I watched to escape reality turn out to be an inescapable reality that scares me out of my wits.



Fig. 3 Small-leaved Clematis, *Clematis microphylla*. Photo © Heather Hesterman 2018.

In his book, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, writer Amitav Ghosh describes climate change as “a crisis of culture, and thus of imagination” (9). I feel it is also a time of dislocations whereby a great forgetting has misted itself into our consciousness and taken up residence. A *forgetting* that is pervasive, dissolving facts into water-coloured washes with details blurred and unreadable. Warnings such as those made in Rachel Carson’s book, *Silent Spring*, were once vibrant and defined. However, these have slipped from our general awareness aided by the forgetting that disperses the whole until its parts are singular, disjointed and too complex to reform or fathom. The difficulty for the individual today is to imagine whole planetary sys-

tems as well as millions of localised ones. To hold these two scales concurrently in one's consciousness is akin to viewing the 1977 film, *Powers of Ten*, created by designers and thinkers, Ray and Charles Eames; not in its intended sequence of frames that move the viewer from a picnic rug to the edges of space, zooming back to a single carbon atom, but rather as a simultaneously spliced version, so that the expansive and reduced visions of scale collide, and both inversions are viewed uncomfortably as a single morphed and complex entity. Multi-layered and complex, just like life.



Fig. 4 Merri Creek. Photo © Heather Hesterman 2020

The *forgetting* however, reduces language into simple sound bites. Governments speak in affirmations, repetitions and monosyllabic utterances. Copied and embraced by many, these are now current forms of verbal communication. Everything is either *great* or *awful* with nothing in between, Trump-talk. The weight of

planetary problems is distressing, and the *forgetting* seems to have multiplied when I wasn't looking... so whilst a global pandemic is also multiplying with disastrous and tragic consequences, I get my mask on. I make sure my shoelaces are tied and tell my children who are studying remotely, or streaming with screens blazing unchecked, that I am disappearing for a walk along the Merri Creek.

Walking for one hour and now two for exercise, mandated by the State Government, has been an activity that propels people out of their houses. Walking has taken on new significance for Melburnians whilst in COVID-19 lockdown: exercise is a reason to legally leave your house and you are reminded as you put one foot in front of the other, that you can walk 5 km in any direction. Knowing that is a quiet freedom.

Walk-
ing
creates
a rhythm;
the gait
somehow syncs
in with the brain.
Maybe the heart's
rhythm also aligns, com-
plemented by gently swinging
arms. Melbournians have been
walking for months now, looking
at front gardens and possibly noticing
more. I discover streets I didn't know
existed within ten minutes of my house.
Trees and shrubs are blooming, with plants
receiving extra attention as gardening booms as
a key lockdown activity. I admit to exchanging with
'horty-friends' photos of plants looking totally gorgeous
and recognise that this is probably one of the stages for
humans falling in love with "the photosynthetic ones"
(Myers 54). Nurseries have been busy attending to the increased
demands for plant stock. Initially tricky for interstate wholesalers to
supply the local Melbourne market, we have now become experts at
online shopping, in the click and collect system.

I am grateful, as within walking distance of my home are the Merri Creek and Yarra River. Walking along and with these waterways has offered me different lenses with which to travel. As I walk, I am reminded of *Deep Time*, an arts project that I was involved with at the nearby Spensley Street Primary School in 2014, where every student from prep to grade six participated. The Merri Creek was the backdrop for this project, which featured numerous walks with a range of foci. Geography, geology, Indigenous history, colonial attitudes, aquatic ecosystems, botany, landscape design and art practice combined to form a rich cross-curricular approach.

The success of the program relied on the generosity of staff, teachers and importantly the many parent artists who volunteered their time and expertise to making the project such a rich experience. Artist Sarah Tomasetti and I walked with the year 5/6 level, creating programs for fresco, painting, rubbings and ephemeral installations. The students walked to specific sites along the Merri Creek and were guided to carefully observe features within the landscape. They experienced the creek at different times of the day, listening to the sounds around them, with ducks flying past, magpies warbling, bikes clicking and trains slowly rattling past. The creek was another classroom setting, with students at ease in their surroundings through repeated visits. The Merri Creek enabled students and teachers to slow down, both learning new and beneficial ways of being that can only be facilitated by being outdoors.



Fig. 5 Merri Creek. Deep Time Artist in Schools Program. Photo © Sarah Tomasetti 2014

The geology of the creek was originally part of a huge lava flow that formed Victoria's great basalt plains. Today I walk alone on the concrete path with everyone else. It is not only the geology that is layered and present; ghosts walk here too.

Near Rushall station, the flats and riparian zone of the creek are reputedly the site of Batman's infamous Treaty (1835) with Indigenous peoples (OnlyMelbourne; Romanov-Hughes). As I walk this route this fact floats and hovers; it is a reminder that this land was invaded, and that as part white settler Australian I am indirectly the beneficiary of this colonial action. There is much work to be done here. Colonial dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands by the British caused profound traumas to all First Nations people, affecting knowledge, language and culture. The injustices of past actions reverberate today, and require acknowledgement of settler Australia's relatively recent history, with honest accounting and reparations.

Fig. 6 Merri Creek. A possible site of the infamous signing of Batman's Treaty.
Photo © Heather Hesterman 2020



As I continue walking my eye catches the introduced willow and elm trees that originally would have journeyed to Australia onboard a boat. The willows have subsequently taken root, multiplied and colonised many waterways to the detriment of local fish and plant species. These trees are a visceral reminder of plant migrations enabled by the invention of the Wardian case in 1829, as traced by historian Luke Keogh. Similar to a mini glasshouse, this portable enclosed structure of glass and timber, protected small seedlings and plants from damaging salt spray during shipping. The Wardian case was instrumental in aiding colonial expansion, plantation agriculture, subsequent profiteering and exploitation. The Assam and Sikkam tea industries were established in 1848 with plants shipped in Wardian cases from China to India. “In total nearly 20,000 tea plants were transplanted in what might be one of the world’s largest acts of botanical espionage,” Keogh observed (8). Australia played a vital role in the Wardian case’s initial development. In 1833, Ward sent his first sealed timber case filled with grasses, ferns and mosses from London to Sydney to test both durability of the case and survival of the plants over a long ship voyage with varying temperatures. He received a letter from Sydney dated 23 November 1833 indicating that the “experiment” had succeeded and the plants had arrived alive (6).



Fig. 7 Yarra River. Photo © Heather Hesterman 2020

The Wardian case facilitated global mobilities of plants and humans. Transporting both plants and pathogens, this box changed soils, lives and landscapes forever. Humans exploited plants as global agents by co-opting them to colonise new spaces, invading and thriving, often at the expense of local flora. What appears initially to be a calm and natural setting of vegetation by a creek is an ongoing struggle for survival as each plant species aims to access sunlight, nutrients for growth and reproduction.

As I continue walking along the Merri Creek, I observe other exotic plants species that have made a home here. A Canary Island Date Palm, Prickly Pears, Oak trees, Blackberry and Blue Periwinkle, to name a few, all form a living record of plant migrations aided by humans. Plants now ensconced by the waterways whose histories

Fig. 8 Merri Creek. Prickly pear, basalt and ducks. Photo © Heather Hesterman 2020



include escapees from suburban gardens, trade/exchange and theft from other lands. For me, my daily walk to the Creek has been a great salve to the current COVID-19 crisis, as it has also been for the many others who use the Merri Creek path to skate, ride, jog or walk. If you locate yourself in a particular spot, with trees in view, avoiding evidence of built environments in certain angles, you can almost trick yourself visually that you are elsewhere. However, the sounds of traffic, trains and horns place you directly in the constructed public space. I have found this game of pretending momentarily at being alone surrounded by trees to be a valuable coping mechanism; playing with illusions of vision and the mind has assisted in my attempt to stay grounded and calm during the lockdown.

Walking with the Merri Creek has allowed me to momentarily escape the mundane, with the repetition of the route providing predictable comfort along this highly cultivated and managed site. Interestingly, the return journey along the same route is completely different and I am secretly amazed at the different details my eye rests upon, sometimes familiar and at other times completely new. I notice the wattle's flowering season has finished. I've observed several willows altering their forms, from bare skeletal armature to bursting buds of light green. They are now adorned with vibrant lime leafy frills.

Humans noticing plants, is an acknowledgment from one species to another of the other's existence, (albeit, it is a small gesture). To notice is to give attention to something. To pause, to attend to and engage with things in the world—might this momentum be translated into acts of caring? Walking, as a practice, offers more than the mobility of getting from point A to B. In the context of walking along the Merri Creek and Yarra River (and even to an extent in reading this piece), there is a moment of being present with many 'vegetal-beings' (after Irigaray and Marder)—to encounter and acknowledge plant-kin. In drawing attention to these vegetal lives, perhaps new relationships may develop with time, growing into kind admiration for plants, for rich 'chlorophyllic encounters', along with active human advocacy, ethical consideration and genuine love for vegetal-beings.

I draw a deep breath through my cotton fabric mask and mentally acknowledge the photosynthetic ones, on whom I am dependant for oxygen. Glancing into the distance, with the smell of eucalyptus floating in the air, I try breathing in and out calmly, and keep walking.

Fig. 9 Heather Hesterman, *Conspire*, 2021, digital print.
Photo © Heather Hesterman



Please view the short video *Walking in Merri Circles* (2020) here: <https://vimeo.com/713548798>

Walking playlist includes: Bonobo, Boards of Canada, Sampa the Great, Christine and the Queens, and Eric Satie's Gymnopédies. You can access it here: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7roBvYlhv50bMozYg6tl2f?si=f1d5b62f778c4551>

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NOTES

- 1 The Mauna Loa Observatory recorded the CO₂ levels for 22 May 2022 at 421.46ppm (NOAA).