

Recovering a narrative of place—stories in the time of climate change

April 27 2018, by Tony Birch



Before the outsiders arrived in Wurundjeri country this billabong enjoyed a vital ecological connection with other waterways.

Five years ago, I was invited to participate in a global project on climate change. The aim was to engage 15-year-old students with the challenges posed by climate change and the increase of extreme weather events. The students would be asked to respond to the challenge through creativity, initially through an introduction to the science underpinning climate change. In the following 18 months, I visited schools in Ireland, England, Germany and Poland, and also worked with a group of students at Footscray City College in Melbourne. The project would culminate in an environmental youth summit at the International Literature Festival Berlin.

I consider myself an innovative and engaging teacher, and looked forward to the project. It took me only the one class to realise the challenge would be a difficult one. What I discovered in speaking to students was that while they were in no way "anti-science", headline-grabbing climate change scepticism had impacted on their faith in their own ability to understand science, highlighting what I've always believed to be the motivation of sceptics: the undermining of our own confidence to think and grasp ideas.

It also took me little time to realise that, in general, the students felt badly let down by some adults: politicians, sections of the media and, to an extent, their own parents, who they felt had neglected an issue that would soon impact negatively on their adult lives. There were moments when I felt that the project was about to fail, until I was walking along the banks of the Maribyrnong River in Melbourne's western suburbs and came up with an idea. I began that morning's class with a simple prompt: "Tell me about your river."

During the following months of travel across Australia and Europe, I learnt about a girl's love for a pony paddock at the end of a street on a so-called "depressed" public housing estate on the outskirts of Dublin, a community hammered by the global financial crisis of the early 2000s.

Teenagers living in the town of Hel, a decommissioned Cold War military base on the edge of the Baltic Sea, wrote and spoke of their anger about the deaths of seals along the beachfront near their homes due to contaminated sea [water](#). And in London, I met kids from across the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe who took photographs of the sky above street corners and demanded it be freed from poisons.

We also discussed the relationship between climate change and the havoc created by "natural" disasters, including hurricanes, floods and ferocious bushfires such as the Black Saturday fires that devastated my home state of Victoria in 2009 and killed 173 people. I talked about country in the sense that Indigenous communities in Australia understand and experience it. We talked about a future, shared or not shared – the latter of which leads to our further disconnection from each other and place. Finally, I asked each student a question: "What are we seeking when we speak of climate justice?" The universal response was not restricted to justice for humans alone. My students had come to believe that if we fail to care for country, it cannot care for us.

At the conclusion of the project, a group of young global citizens, many of them labelled "disadvantaged", many of them previously silent or ignored, shared a common belief, one as simple and yet complex as the difficulties we face in dealing with one of the great challenges of our time. The students agreed that we must listen to those who have lived with country for thousands of years without killing it, and in order to live with a healthy planet we need to tell stories of our experience with it, and our love for it. Stories that speak of a love of place encourage us to act ethically towards it. We must share our stories, and we must grant equal voice to the stories of others.

Denialism

I turned 13 in 1970. My large family was living in a crumbling terrace in a lost triangle of Collingwood, an inner suburb of Melbourne. We were hemmed in by the Collingwood Football Ground, a railway line and goods yards, and a row of derelict 19th-century textile mills. Behind the vacant factories lay a place of hidden treasures: the Birrarung (Yarra River), Dights Falls and another site of dereliction, the Deep Rock Basin, a swimming club built on a bank of the river 60 years earlier, which had become a ruin. This section of the river would occupy my teenage years, and would provide the source of my 2015 novel, *Ghost River*.

A dominant theme of both the novel and my teenage memory of that time is the terrible level of neglect and vandalism the river suffered. For more than a hundred years, the Birrarung had been treated as little more than an open sewer for the noxious industries built along its western bank. The river was also the dumping ground for the unwanted: stolen cars, animal carcasses, and those who occasionally suicided by jumping from one of the many bridges spanning the river, their suit pockets weighed down with stones. As Melbourne competed with Sydney for the title of "gangland capital of Australia" throughout the 20th century, the river was sometimes the last resting place of members of Melbourne's criminal underground.

In 1971, the Victorian state government came up with the idea to build a new freeway, beginning outside my front gate, stretching into the leafy eastern suburbs. It was a plan that would destroy country. The freeway, planned to abut my river, would consist of five lanes in each direction, a utopian solution that would put an end to one of Melbourne's most congested traffic locations. Or so claimed the glossy brochures dropped in the letterboxes of homes that would be demolished to turn a dream into reality. It would be only a short time after the opening of the Eastern Freeway that the state's most recent super artery, opened to allow the city to breathe, would clog the city's veins yet again. Over the following

40 years, many more freeways and extensions have been built, crisscrossing and extending the infamous Melbourne sprawl – a city that has undergone more than one quadruple bypass which is yet to save the patient.



‘I was surprised to find myself standing before a still stretch of water.’

The building of the Eastern Freeway required the obliteration of a vital section of the river at its confluence with the Merri Creek, a once majestic waterway winding its way into the north across Wurundjeri

land. The Merri, as equally neglected as the Birrarung, faces a daily battle against urbanisation in the form of household rubbish, chemical waste and weed infestation. If our river and creek valleys are "the lungs of the city", historically we have forced them to breathe toxins.

To visit the confluence today is to engage in a fiction. An interpretive sign where the two waterways meet instructs visitors that it was this very site where the first "[Aboriginal school](#)" was erected to educate local Indigenous children who had become the subjects of the colonial project. It may seem a harmless story to tell. And yet it reflects the omissions of both narrative and landscape histories underpinning the colonisation. Firstly, as with many ventures that set out to "civilise the native", the Merri Creek school was a failure. Attendance was fleeting, if it happened at all, and Aboriginal communities of the area and its surrounds quickly lost faith in the empty promises of colonial authorities that their customary way of life would be retained and protected.

The "site" of the school's location is not the site of the school at all. It cannot be so, as when the freeway was being built a section of the river was destroyed by bulldozers and explosives. (The regular blasts would rattle my nearby bedroom window.) The original meeting of river and creek was around a hundred metres north, and the location that people visit today is an ornamental construction with an ecological and human history less than 50 years old.

Such fibbing may not seem major when measured against the "big lies" of colonial history, such as the widespread murder of Indigenous people across Australia and the ecological destruction of country. After all, what is a mere hundred metres of lost or fictionalised country? Well, it's everything. It's the basis of another form of denialism within Australia and Western colonial societies across the globe: the denial of colonial violence, of attempted dispossession; the disregard shown for the rights and autonomy of country; and, of course, the denial of climate change

and the urgent need to work for climate justice. When we tell stories of place, fiction can play a key role. But we must identify it as such, rather than use it as a convenient mask.

Going upriver

When I was around 14, a friend and I stole a bicycle from the Victoria Park Railway Station. We spent the next hour or so rattling around the cobblestoned back streets of Collingwood, me being dinked on the handlebars. We eventually became bored. (I also had a sore arse.) We bought a meat pie each for lunch, rode the bike down to the river and sat above Dights Falls eating the pies and smoking cigarettes. It was then that my friend told me he'd once walked upriver for a day with one of his uncles, who made his living from breeding ferrets and catching rabbits.

During the walk, they visited water holes and ponds, none of which ran into the river itself or appeared on any map. He also told me there were eucalypt trees in the water holes that "old blackfellas" had used to make bark canoes – scar trees. Without another word between us we hopped on the bike, my friend pedalling furiously along a narrow track. We rode for miles in the rain, past a massive paper mill spewing smoke from chimneys, past the towers of a 19th-century "lunatic" asylum, occasionally getting bogged in near-swamp conditions. I would have to jump off the handlebars and walk on until we came to firmer ground.

Just as I was losing faith in the truth of my friend's story, he turned off the track. We parked the bike against a tree and I followed my friend through the thickest stand of trees that a boy who had rarely travelled two miles out of the centre of the city had seen. I trailed him through the bush, my thin running shoes buried in mud. The trees above us thickened and it became dark. I could hear the call of many birds, a foreign but comforting sound. Further on, the landscape gradually thinned and I

could see the sky above me. The trail ended suddenly and I was surprised to find myself standing before a still stretch of water, stained with what I now know to be the tannins of bark and fallen eucalypt leaves.

We sat on the bank and smoked more cigarettes. Except for the birdsong there was no sound in the air, a sensation I had never experienced before. I watched a water bird gracefully glide across the surface of the water, also without making a sound. When I think back to that first visit to the billabong what I remember most clearly was that, although I had no words for how I felt, no poetry with which to express myself, it was the first time in the life of an Aboriginal "slum kid" that country had spoken to me. Although I wasn't looking forward to the long and bumpy ride home in the rain, it was not the reason for me wanting to stay by the water. Without understanding why, I had never felt so at ease with myself.

That night, we arrived at my back gate after dark. I knew I would be in trouble from my dad, but I didn't care. Before leaving him, I wanted to say something about the day's adventure to my friend. I do remember that I thanked him for showing me his secret place, but also knew it wasn't enough. Lying in bed that night and thinking about the billabong, I realised that I wanted to say to my friend that it was a beautiful place, but couldn't do it. Which one of us would have been more embarrassed by the word, I couldn't say. After all, at the time, we thought of ourselves the budding kings of a concrete jungle, and taking aside the romance of a life of thuggery, we lived in a world where violence was rarely threatened but often practiced. If I forgot about the billabong for a time, I now believe that amnesia came from having been denied the language to speak of it, to know it.



The trail along the Birrarung. Credit: Tony and Wayne

Return to the billabong

I live in Carlton, about a hundred metres away from the house I was born into 60 years ago. People who know me well also know that distance-running has guided my life for almost 40 years now. It saved me from alcoholism at a young age, swore me away from cigarettes and provided my mind with the clean slate I needed to discover a love of writing. I have run by many rivers in Australia; in Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane and, of course, my home town of Narm (Melbourne). I have also run in cities around the world, including Wellington, Tokyo, Berlin, London, San Francisco, Gdańsk and Banff. Most lifelong runners have a favourite

run, a special route, where they feel "at home" with themselves. I have such a run, one that returns me to the billabong.

I prepare for my run with a public transport "swipe card" in the pocket of my running shorts and some coins for the telephone in case I do myself an injury, break down and need to call my wife. (This has never happened, but I have learnt in life to prepare for all manner of potential disasters. And no, I have never had a mobile phone, which means I do not fully adhere to the notion of preparing for all disasters.) I leave home and catch the nearby train, get out at Heidelberg Station and begin the 12-kilometre run home, most of the distance being along a trail skirting the Birrarung.

Most runners are also pedants, each possessing a minimum of at least one inexplicable idiosyncrasy. I have several, one of which used to be the cardinal rule, never stop: not for an injury, a pedestrian, road train or traffic light. In older age, I have gradually weaned myself off this suicidal commandment. The need to stop can actually beat chronic injury or death, I have decided. I didn't realise until I began my first river run from Heidelberg several years ago that I would be more than happy to stop during a run and contemplatively be with country. It was on that first run that I became eerily familiar with surroundings that I thought I had not visited before. It was on that first run that as I was jogging by a stand of mighty eucalypts that I realised I had returned to the billabong.

It sits around the halfway point of my run, and is now surrounded by the imposition of "civilisation", non-existent when I first visited the water. I approach the billabong from a hilltop. If it is a sunny morning, its surface reflection will wink at me. If the wind is blowing from the south, I will pick up the scent of silted tea-stained water. The Eastern Freeway runs along the southern fringe of the billabong, and the flow of traffic is so constant that sitting by the water and listening, it is difficult to discern

the sounds of an individual car or truck engine. The guttural hum is singular and unbroken. Remarkably, the bird call remains clear. I'm not sure if it has something to do with a variance in pitch, but the birds seem to have little trouble singing above the traffic.

It is not possible to know where I sat on the afternoon I first visited the billabong over 45 years ago. Memory is always suspect, and the landscape surrounding the billabong has changed dramatically over the years. The long section of riverbank running parallel to the freeway has been "beautified", and the lush and private golf courses each side of the billabong compete with it for water. Most days when I visit, I sit and watch the passing joggers, dog walkers, cyclists and kite-flyers. I'm happy they enjoy the river, and I hope they also care for it. But occasionally I wish I could have it to myself. I wish I could enjoy the billabong in the way I did the day of our bike ride, knowing and not knowing how fortunate I was.

Selfishness is no virtue. What I wish for the billabong most of all, and my relationship to it, is that it continues to survive all it has been confronted by. Before the outsiders arrived in Wurundjeri country the billabong enjoyed a vital ecological connection with other waterways on country. Many of them have since been suffocated by occupation and development. The vast network of wetlands surrounding the Birrarung, from its birth in the mountains to its mouth at what we now call Port Phillip Bay, previously acted as both a repository of life and a sponge, absorbing and distributing water across large tracts of land. These days the river is governed, held in place, against its will. The same could be said for the billabong. And yet, its beauty and tenacity remain a force.

Love for places

I have recently worked with a group of Aboriginal Elders at a community centre in the far western suburbs of my city. Most of these

wonderful people do not live on their own country. Some of them, members of the stolen generations, have never lived on country. Their place is the community centre where they meet four days a week to make art, to cook and tell each other stories – and, not surprisingly, many of those stories are stories of loss.

They, like the students I taught with five years ago, know little about the hard science of [climate change](#). But they are people who take the care of others, the right to justice for others, very seriously. They are a humble group. If they feel bitter about the injustices that they have been subject to throughout their lives; they choose not to speak about it, to me at least, and they never write about it.

What they do is write and paint stories of the love of the places they live in, outer suburban streets, lounge rooms and backyards. They also write about a profound attachment to, and love for places they have never seen, not in this life, as one of the Elders explained to me. They make stories of the places, the country they were stolen from. In a material sense, the group is as marginalised as it gets. To an outsider they may appear powerless, perhaps inarticulate. They are neither. They have a story to tell, a story that they happily share. To love country and to be loved by it is the basis of their survival, and ours.

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