

S W A M P

*WALKING THE WETLANDS OF
THE SWAN COASTAL PLAIN*

NANDI CHINNA



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It is through the lake system. There is a water serpent down there below which is extremely important and the water on the surface is really the marks where the waugle wither wound his way through and came up after making the streams and the waterways. It's all part of the ecological system to purify the land and the family. Once it was surrounded by waterways and if they fill them up with rubbish then the land begins to die.

Cedric Jacobs

A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature.

Henry David Thoreau

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Introduction – Swamp Walking

I shall never understand, how it can be called a pleasure to hurtle past all the images and objects which our beautiful earth displays, as if one had gone mad and had to accelerate for fear of despair.

Robert Walser

Walking; putting one foot in front of the other, poising the weight on one foot and then tilting the body forward with the other foot, swinging this foot in front of the body and placing it on the ground in front of you to prevent falling. Walking reconstructs Galileo's pendulum, the legs move through time and space, marking the movement over grass, stones, hills, and through wind which is air moving through space. I walk slowly and time dissipates to the stillness of my breath wrapping around me in tight coils. As I pick up speed, time gathers to meet me, rushing around the curvature of the Earth.

For the creative practitioner, walking reintroduces the body as a fundamental definer of experience. The walker uses the body as a 'divining rod', pacing through time and the city, noticing what demands to be noticed, and stitching together maps which link sense perceptions with histories in order to build a greater dimension into the narrative that defines place. As Rebecca Solnit observes in her history of walking, 'exploring the world is one of the best ways of exploring the mind, and walking travels both terrains' [1].

From March 2009 until March 2012 I undertook a series of walks in and around Perth's drained and buried wetlands as well as those remnant wetlands which still exist and which offer a reference point to the swampy history of the Swan Coastal Plain. I walked twice, often three times per week in the first eighteen months, which reduced to two walks per week in the latter half of the project. I wore out two pairs of walking shoes and made a significant impact upon a third pair.

Walking the shores of Perth's lakes becomes a radical activity when we consider that most of these wetland lakes are now buried beneath the roads and buildings of the metropolitan area. In these times of water restrictions and desalination plants it may surprise many present day residents of Perth to discover that the Swan Coastal Plain, where Perth city is located, was once characterised by complex chains and suites of wetlands, fed by fresh springs and underwater aquifers. Perth was once a seasonally wet place with an abundance of fresh water.

In order to find the lost wetland lakes, I placed new maps of Perth over old maps, maps which are sometimes just plans of the city-to-be. Here the soft blurred shapes of lakes, the traced outline of phantom water bodies, are just visible beneath the surveyor's straight lines and grids.

In the spirit of the psychogeographers, my walks were planned in as much as the starting points were defined but I also maintained an openness which allowed me to stumble across the unexpected – Walter's Brook flowing beneath back lanes, its sound and smell emanating from an open drain vent – and to change direction if the terrain dictated it, to follow birds, and paths made by walking, to have encounters with people and wildlife, and sometimes to wander too far and too long resulting in sore feet and weary countenance. My walks were most often conducted at a slow pace, and could more be described as a ramble, amble or as it is beautifully expressed in Noongar language, a '*yannow*; to saunter; to walk; to move slowly along' [2]. This kind of walking is also closely aligned with the idea of the psychogeographical *dérive* translated literally as 'drift', or what Alistair Bonnett calls 'politically purposeful drifting' [3]. Where possible I used my bicycle and/or public transport to reach the beginning of my walks, and this too became part of the journey, across the country of my enquiry, to the historical country beneath.

In my walking practice my research tools are my body and my imagination. I try as much as possible to use all my senses in my enquiry. Walking also involves sitting in places and engaging in

deep listening, exploring the layers of sound from the loudest to the barely perceptible. It involves tasting plants, water and air, touching these same; noticing wind currents, movements of birds and people, and all the colliding and conflicting sensations that the body experiences in an environment. I record my observations in a series of notebooks, and use these notes to later inform the poems I write.

Poetry contains both rational and irrational elements. For Edward Hirsch, poetry shoulders ‘the burden of the mystery’ [4] and can be at once illuminating yet casting its own shadows. Poetry perhaps offers another, deeper perspective upon sets of events which situate us in time and space and help us to understand where we are. Matthew Cooperman reflects that ‘in leading us ever on and in, a poem clears a space for contemplation and action; it gathers utility as a vehicle of imminent clearing’ [5]. To define my walking/writing practice I constructed the neologism *poepatetics* or the poetry of walking: *poe* from *poesis* or making; *patetics* from *peripatetics* or walking, travelling; a person who walks and travels about [6]. More simply put, *poepatetics* is ‘making from walking’. *Poepatetics* is a combination of three disciplines: the observed phenomena, the subjective bodily experience, and transcription of both the tangible and enigmatic into text.

Poepatetics has a long history reflected in the poetry of Mastuo Basho in the seventeenth century through to Wordsworth, Dickens, Whitman, Thoreau, Wallace Stevens, Robert Walser, and more recently W. G. Sebald, Rebecca Solnit, Mary Oliver and Gary Snyder, all of whom are walker-writers whose work reflects the drive of homesickness for the wild, and for beings other than human.

The production of the poems in this work is closely related to the walking practice; it is the physical experience of the places in which I walk that really provides the basis for most of the pieces. Even the historical poems are informed by my walking knowledge of the terrain and my intimacy with wetlands that exist today.

These walks in wetlands provide me with a way of imagining how things were for the newcomers who came to encounter, misunderstand and ultimately destroy most of the swamps on the Swan Coastal Plain

When I examine my own motivations for writing about the lost lakes of Perth, I come to see that my forays in the city and the resulting poems are motivated by a sense of grief over the loss of local and global ecosystems and the escalating rate of species extinctions. The black birds that fly overhead as I walk – the Carnaby’s cockatoo and the forest red-tailed cockatoo – are two such species that, due to land clearing and climate change, are predicted to become extinct within the next fifty years [7]. The wetlands that remain as remnants on the Swan Coastal Plain are disappearing as my pen scrawls across the page, due to continuing urban development, altered hydrology and climate change [8]. The walking project is an attempt to find a horizon within this dialogue of loss, and within the altered geography of local and global environments.

In *Openings: A Meditation of History, Method, and Sumas Lake*, Anne Cameron suggests that whilst many people are aware that global environments are facing unprecedented degradation, a deeper, more important issue is the ‘real human capacity to forget a disappeared environment’ [9]. When a landscape such as the Swan Coastal Plain has been so thoroughly altered and re-engineered, the flora, fauna, lakes and rivers that connect people to the history and stories of a place are easily forgotten. Cameron argues that ‘perhaps one purpose of history is to make people miss what they haven’t experienced and to help them understand where they are’. It is in this spirit that I have utilised the methodologies of the Situationists who developed psychogeography, harnessing in particular what Bonnett describes as an ‘uprooted nostalgia: a free-floating sense of loss that presents permanent marginality’ [10], and what Albrecht calls ‘solastalgia,’ the homesickness induced by radical change in a home place [11]. I do so in order to address the loss of the

wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain as a metaphor for wider global losses of environments and the non-human life that has disappeared with them.

As poeapatics practitioner Robert Walser explains in his short story 'The Walk':

Walk ... I definitely must, to invigorate myself and to maintain contact with the living world, without perceiving which I could not write the half of one more single word, or produce the tiniest poem in verse or prose. Without walking, I would be dead, and my profession, which I love passionately, would be destroyed. [12]

For me the walk is essential to the creative process, both as a lyrical meter, a bodily metronome, and as a way of perceiving the writer's connection and relation to the world in which they live. As I step out of my house on the west coast of Australia, near Fremantle, the south-westerly wind is sweeping across the park, depositing a fine taste of salt on my skin and tongue. My body shifts inside my clothes, stiff and slow to get moving. My feet, encased in light shoes, roll along the contours of rough ground. A bank of cloud hovers above the ridge to the west, where a flock of black Carnaby's cockatoos is reeling and wee-looing. I gain momentum, striding across the ragged grass that sews a fine covering across the history of this ground. My elderly neighbour remembers this ground as a swamp where Noongar people camped. She recalls walking along the edge of the swamp, past their camp on her way to the bus stop on Rockingham Road. My friend Tim remembers playing here in the 1960s, launching a homemade corrugated iron canoe between reeds into black water. I am walking through space that is also time and history. The stories enter my stride as I walk and are recorded on the map that is being walked into my body.



Boojoormelup – Lake Henderson, 1864 [1]

Writing on Water

First you must wade through the minutiae
copepods, water boatman, and backswimmers.
You may be bitten by fleas
reborn after aestivating for two hundred years.
Remember frogs cannot swallow
with their eyes open so they may not see you coming.
Sift out the sediment. (This can be achieved by taking off
your shirt and straining the water through the cloth.)
There is a lot to know before you can start:
water can kill as easily as quench,
water can be very old;
water makes ink run,
will dissolve paper.
One letter too many or too few
can change the whole meaning.
Until it dries out you may not be able to understand
what water has to say.

A Line Made by Walking

after Richard Long

How many footsteps will it take
to walk a place into the body?

From back door to garden, around each raised bed,
pressing a pad through harvest and fallow.

Beyond the front gate, countless ambulations
scorn footpaths, traverse weedy verges,
pace a cartography of desire
into the neighbourhood.

How many footsteps will it take
to trample grass stems, crush flowers
make a line by walking?

Boardwalk

Walking on water;
under canopies of paperbark and flower,
reed beds lean with the prevailing wind,
seeds drift west like a plague of insects.
The sound of footsteps on pine boards,
whirr of a camera deconstructing and re-authoring,
the lens seeks movement and finds subterfuge:
rustling and clicking, reed stems seem to turn their backs,
a tree branch quivers, the pond surface breaks all exits.

Mud Pie

Water was the first being;
then alluvium came without trace or mark,
before Kronos when the world
was still a cold mud pie,
any event pressed into it
later reads as history.

Cut yourself a piece and bite;
it'll taste like salt, like bodily fluids,
sparks will turn in an upward drift
forming wings, legs, whole arks
full of species illuminating the night.

Dead for years,
their lights still flicker
through the cycle of turning;
and trick us into believing that we know where we are,
that all we see passing will return again.

The City

A great abundance of fresh water of the best quality.

Charles Fraser, 1827 [1]

A scratch in the sand reveals fresh inundations,
mosquitoes are most peculiarly intimate,
swans can be plucked like black lilies
blooming in shallow reed beds.

Here is the place;
to stretch linen and rope across
the littoral where mudflats prevent the ocean
from swallowing the river.

This could be the future in two dimensions,
Between here and Mt Eliza tendrils of smoke
smudge the view, springs bleed south
beneath ink line drawings
of the imminent, the unborn city.

I have just returned from (Perth) ... Not a blade of grass to be seen – nothing but sand, scrub, shrubs and stunted trees from the verge of the river to the tops of the hills ... The soil is such, on which no human being can possibly exist.

Samuel Taylor, 1830 [2]



Mounts Bay Road, Perth, c. 1870 [2]

We had an excursion to Perth ... such a comfortless hole. The miserable huts are built of wood on a soil of dark-coloured sand swarming with fleas and mosquitoes. A more perfect purgatory could not be devised.

Sydney Gazette, January 1830

Shoes

George Fletcher Moore's Found Poem [3]

No object to steer by
except your own shadow
moving as you move,
perplexing motion.

Boot leather enacts
the principles of increase and decay:
cracks open at the toe line,
with each step the parched sole
wounds back into porous skin.

Every two or three weeks
lace and tongue return to soil;
*there is a great shortage of shoes
in the whole colony.*

Sinking a Well, 1832

A scrape in the ground 2 feet deep
is level with the summer sunk swamp.
Beneath the ground's skein
the country tells its story in layers:
vegetable mould, blue and black clay,
white or dun clay, buff loamy clay,
yellow sandy loam, dun loamy sand.

Water at 12 feet,
brackish but suitable for washing.
Potable at 16 feet, cool and sapid:
place your lips to the tea-stained hole
and suck.

Boundaries

Eucalyptus rudis, flooded gum

When the last two trees were struck with an axe, for the purpose of making a boundary mark – a jet d'eau issued from out of a blue gum tree, and continued running without intermission during the time of our stay – a quarter of an hour. This water had a strong chalybeate taste.

George Fletcher Moore [3]

A fountain of subterranean creek water
sieved through stones and gravel,
pumped through sun-punched leaves
turned sideways to shade their faces

Below the surface old rain
edges towards air, revolves
on this endless circuit;
seeps through canvas bags,
rusts the cloth of shirts.

In a land with no corners
the fence posts are alive;
their bark peels like skin, their sap
soaks mouths, bites tongues.

Swan River Fish, 14th September 1832

Fish numerous in the river about and below Perth. I mentioned our having taken 10 000 at one draught of the seine.

George Fletcher Moore [3]

We dip our oars in the wake of morning
stroking rings in an auric surface,
beneath our longing mullet ride,
grazing weed in the turn of tide.

Salt diffuses into sweetness,
flutes the river up to Guildford,
a gallimaufry of fish leaping,
surges into calloused weaving.

From the tangle of the river's body
every fish is a mouthful breaching,
hauled across the transom's line,
shattered scale and opaque eye;

a silver pile heaped on the bank:
kingy, snapper, mullet, perch,
cobblers' blade and darkening twist,
the jagged spines of Swan River fish.

The sunlight's cast upon the river
seals the furrows of our keel;
we count and stitch our catch in threes,
fish-shaped lanterns hang from trees.

Kingsford's Mill in Perth

Mr Kingsford proposes to cut a deep trench and lay a pipe from some lagoons behind Perth, into the town to afford him a good supply of water.

George Fletcher Moore [3]

February spikes the afternoon into evening;
frogs entomb themselves
in the peat of the swamp
like an emperor's clay army.

Wedged between god and mortal,
lungs barely whisper,
for months or years in deep meditation
suspending all thought of
caddis fly, mosquito, and spawn.

A percussion of boot steps
wakes the sleeping amphibians;
shovel blades and crowbars
void them through the flume,
churning mill wheels
into their next incarnation.

1862

The sky is breaking, draining clouds,
pinging against unfamiliar rooftops,
insisting its way to the lowest point
and then raising its skirts higher.

The river spills from karstic furrows,
opens the ground in a wide brown gash.

Fish eggs hatch from muddy nests,
glaucomic tadpoles make their way across town,
their frogselves singing from newly formed ponds.

Rows of cabbages and potatoes
drift from their moorings,
a flock of great cormorants perched on the fence line,
sing transformation — farmland to lake.

The Ghost Road

Njookenbooroo – Herdsman Lake

The cartographer is not a boatman,
dipping his paddle amongst spinning ducks,
while companionable swans gaggle
in the centre of his calculations.

Beyond his sight a swamp harrier quarters the fringes,
scoping the undulations of sedge and reeds.
Coots dive and emerge again
at the opposite end of measure.

A line drawn on water cannot be transcribed
into chains, perches, miles;
its equations are dismantled
by the punting scull of webbed feet.