



Freya Mathews - *Reinhabiting* the Merri Creek

When Freya Mathews first truly noticed the Merri Creek in the 1980s, it was typical of the many neglected Australian urban waterways of the time: an industrial drain designed to transport the city's stormwater as efficiently and effectively as possible. *"It was an utterly degraded and neglected little gutter"*, she says. But the Creek slowly worked its way into Freya's life and equally, Freya has worked her way into the life of the Creek.

Freya has devoted much of her professional life to thinking about how we can find connection and care for place in contemporary society. Now an emeritus professor of Environmental Philosophy at Latrobe University, and a former philosopher-in-residence at the Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies (CERES), Freya applies the concept of *reinhabitation* to her own life. Reinhabitation is a term that is used to describe the process whereby non-Indigenous people become 'native' again to place, part of the wider philosophy of bioregionalism. As a natural part of that process of embedding, a person comes to care for their home-place.

The Merri Creek really lodged itself in Freya's heart when she undertook a remarkable seven day pilgrimage from the Creek's confluence with Birrarung (Yarra) to its upstream source. On a spring day in 1999, together with friends Cinnamon Evans and Maya Ward, Freya set out on this extraordinary trek *"to follow the creek wherever it leads"*. This walk began Freya's longer journey toward a much deeper relationship with the Creek and its country, as well as her own personal reinhabitation of the Merri Creek. *"This is my place... these are my people, I will make the best of what is here, and I will make what is here blossom"*, she explains. *Reinhabitation*, she says, has an extraordinary impact on the natural world; nature responds to our caring and *"comes alive in this beautiful way"*.

When asked what the Merri Creek means to her, Freya explained:

There is a lovely expression that some of my Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues in the Kimberley use to describe this process of belonging to place: 'becoming family with place' (Anne Poelina et al 2020²). When one becomes family with place, 'place' becomes 'Country' in the Aboriginal sense – a multispecies community to which one belongs and for which one is responsible. Country is no longer merely external to oneself – it has migrated into one's heart and speaks to one, guides one's steps, from there. This is a form of love, perhaps the deepest form. As Poelina et al say, when you love Country in this way, Country loves you back. This is what the Merri Creek means to me, even though the relationship is in my case of course only a shadow of what the Wurundjeri relationship with Country is/would have been. But it is a good start.



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And for Freya, it is deeply personal. Walking the Merri with intention, and the “singing up”¹ of the Creek, comes during a time of ecological, philosophical, cultural and social regeneration, and recognition of Wurundjeri stewardship.

Freya describes the two main aspects of her reinhabitation of the Creek as being two sides of the same coin; the first, to celebrate the area’s revegetation and restoration of ecological character, as evidenced by the return of native birds; and the second, to deepen her familiarity with the local culture, custom and history, such as the artworks, poems, stories, and songs that connect her (and us) with the wider community of life in, and around the Creek.

There have been many walks since Freya’s first singing up of the Creek in 1999, and Freya hopes that the Merri Creek Women’s Walk will spark the formation of a women’s walking group for similar intentional walks along Melbourne’s creeks; the power of walking together. In the words of her friend, Jan Morgan, Freya has been “*a tireless advocate for the Creek*” who has “*inspired hundreds of students to practise respect and care through her teaching and passionate engagement in her local bioregion*”.

Freya’s story is intertwined with that of the Merri Creek and much like the journey of reinhabitation, she recognises that reindigenisation and regeneration are intricately woven processes. Whilst she acknowledges that there remains more to be done, Freya is delighted that Merri Creek is a leading example of urban waterway restoration. A place where nature has not only returned, but has truly come alive

Freya’s nomination, by Jan Morgan

Freya Mathews is emeritus professor of Environmental Philosophy at Latrobe University and has been a tireless advocate for the Merri Creek for many decades. Living within walking range she was witness to its presence first as ‘an utterly degraded and neglected little gutter’ and then gradually to its re-vegetation and the reappearing native birds.

In 1999 she undertook to walk, with two friends (Cinnamon Evans and Maya Ward), from the confluence with Birrarung to the source of the Merri. The goal was ‘to follow the creek wherever it led’, and the planning was a major logistical challenge. It would take seven days. The enchanting story of this extraordinary pilgrimage is told in *Journey to the Source of the Merri* (published by Ginninderra Press in 2003). One of its many gifts being the power of the Merri to gather stories, first as an Indigenous songline, then in our violent colonial overlays, including stories of Hume and Hovell and Ned Kelly and now as a site of re-enchantment and reinhabitation.

Freya’s work has brought to public attention the significance of CERES as part of this vision and a counter to the anthropocentric outlook of the city (see journal article CERES: singing up the city (published in PAN 1, 2000). Freya was appointed philosopher-in-residence at CERES and has inspired hundreds of students to practise respect and care through her teaching and passionate engagement in her local bioregion.

Freya is the author of many books and articles about environmental philosophy.



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More from Freya, in her own words

On reinhabitation

Reinhabitation is an ethos – for non-Indigenous people - of becoming native again to one's own homeplace. It involves learning about the ecology of that homeplace, its geology, hydrology, its history of colonization, its social history – its full story. Reinhabitation is also a practice – the practice of trying to live again within the parameters and affordances of that place. This practice is not only about reducing one's ecological footprint. It is also, equally importantly, about profoundly changing one's consciousness and identity: one aims to become deeply rooted in place, a member of that larger-than-human community, which then in turn becomes the source of one's sense of meaning – one's culture.

One becomes, for instance, a Merri Creek woman, an identity that ties one into the real world, into reality, rather than leaving one stranded in the bubble of human creeds, ideologies, and 'isms'. This kind of identity is one that expresses itself in local food, local crafts, local lore and story, local festivals and art – local culture. When a place finds its community of reinhabitants in this way, every part of it will be cherished, storied, looked after, and culture around the world will become highly differentiated again in accordance with the vastly variable affordances of different places, rather than homogenised as it is under the regime of modern development.

How do you see the future of the Merri Creek and its environs?

I would like to see all the waterways of Melbourne 'sung up' (in the sense of 'en-charned') in the way that the Merri has been and continues to be. Festivals like the Sacred Kingfisher Festival that used to be held yearly at CERES, on the banks of the creek, are key to this process, I think. In its heyday, the Kingfisher Festival included hundreds of local performers, many of them children, and thousands of attendees, who were also participants. This was powerful bioregional ceremony. I would love to see many more festivals like this, up and down the Merri, and along the other waterways too, singing key elements of the ecology/cosmos into relationship and into consciousness. I think the power of such festivals to pull people (especially children) towards place-consciousness is incalculable.

The enchanting story of her extraordinary pilgrimage that followed the Creek "wherever it leads" is told in Freya's book: *Journey to the Source of Merri*, Gininderra Press, Canberra, 2003

On the ethos of reinhabitation, of becoming 'native' to place again in the modern world, and, as a natural part of that process, caring for that place. Freya explored these themes, specifically in relation to Merri Creek and its environs, in a number of papers and in her 2005 book, *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2005, as well as in the little Merri Creek book.

Summaries of a selection of her journal articles can be found on Freya's website: <http://www.freyamathews.net/>

¹ As described in her journal article *CERES: singing up the city*, *Philosophy Activism Nature*, 1, 2000. 'Singing up' is a concept with roots in premodern Western as well as Aboriginal traditions. It draws on links with the Aboriginal saying, "sing it up", relating investing a place with our life, as well as Western ideas of "re-enchantment" (literally to sing it, to inform it with chant or song) and transforming people's relation to their world.

² Sandra Wooltorton, Anne Poelina et al, "Becoming Family with Place", *Resurgence* 322, Sept 2020