

# A Tree Without Roots

My current environmental documentary work, *Water Flowing Underground*, started with a stink. It was the powerful reek of raw sewage, which hit me as I walked my dog, Julia, along the streambed of *Western Run*, which is located in a wooded patch of Baltimore, Maryland in the USA. Labrador retrievers are known for their keen sense of smell, but even without the power of Julia's big snout I knew that the stream had jumped from urban funk to disgusting. A big late September storm had churned the banks and pushed debris up against bridge crossings. However, there was something else, a potent source for that stink. After the flood water subsided it was clear that the stream bank had been scoured out and the wild stream had excavated a once buried sewer line.

Not only had the isolated sewer stack been exposed, it had been toppled in one piece by the convulsing torrent. Imagine a smokestack, snapped at its base and kicked over; that was the scene, which I saw at a distance. As I got closer I peered into the opening and saw swirling grey water -- sheets of soiled nappy wipes pirouetted in a whirlpool of filth. I reached for my cellphone, documented the site in photos and video, and posted them to my neighbourhood "listserv." Neighbours advised me to use Baltimore's 311 reporting website, and after some persistent back and forth over a couple of weeks, the Department of Public Works acted to rebuild the ruined sewer stack. Since then, I have monitored countless "controlled sewage outfalls", which flow into Baltimore's streams, which join the Inner Harbor, and eventually the vast Chesapeake Bay.



Fallen sewer stack, Western Run, November 16, 2016.



Overflowing replacement sewer stack, Western Run, July 24, 2018.

*Baltimore released over 3 million gallons of sewage into Jones Falls  
City reports totals from its "structured" overflows as a result of Friday's rainstorm<sup>47</sup>*

At my local sewage hotspot, two years of civic complaint, photography, video and filings to the City of Baltimore finally seemed to have compelled the DPW to clear the blockage and plug one stinking leak in Baltimore's vast and aged infrastructure. On October 18, 2018, I received an email from the Chief of the Office of Asset Management of the Department of Public Works: *weather cooperating, we are ready to start assessing the condition of the sewer main. Barring any unanticipated event, the contractor will start working tomorrow.* After the lead contamination crisis in Flint, Michigan I stopped taking for granted the ability to twirl a tap to receive clean water. In Baltimore I could no longer ignore the stink or just hope that when we flushed the toilet it would not gush into a stream or seep into our neighbour's basement.

You have been hearing a cautionary American tale. Do not dismiss it, because it echoes my experience at Botany Bay, where sewage shut down the oyster fisheries on the Georges River and mercury is lurking in the sands and bore holes tapping the aquifer around the former chlor-alkali

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<sup>47</sup> Mark Reutter, 2018, *Baltimore Brew*, May 8.

plant at Botany Industrial Park. Australians, who visit the once great cities built up during America's industrial age, will find rot and decay even as we plough the global seas with ten aircraft carriers and lace the skies with stealth bombers. At home we get lost in our smartphones and social networks, while we ignore the fractured transport systems, which link cities. Huge tracts of *row homes* in cities like Baltimore and Detroit have been abandoned.<sup>48</sup> Each day the nationwide opioid crisis trips 200 people into the grave, and the homeless are encamped in makeshift settlements and stand begging at road intersections during a period of economic expansion. It is bleak, indeed, but we have slowly acquiesced to systems, which benefit a few while the majority of Americans struggle with the division and anger so clearly marked in the 2016 Presidential election. It took time to arrive at this point, and in the remainder of this article I will address America's broken trusts and the promise for renewal, which I learned in Australia.



*The Green Peace protest at the Orica waste depot at Port Botany.*

One great goal of the United States Clean Water Act of 1972 was to upgrade century old fresh water and sewer systems. The tragic lead contamination in water fountains in Baltimore's schools, the massive sinkholes, which have struck the central business district, the wooden pipes (!), which are still unearthed in Baltimore, the routine discharge of industrial and human wastes into streams are harbingers of foot-dragging civic and environmental collapse. As Michael Bennet remarked during a Colorado Senate debate in 2010:<sup>49</sup> *I say we have not even had the decency to maintain the assets that our parents and grandparents built for us - our roads, our bridges, our wastewater systems, our sewer systems...* We Americans have failed to invest in our land and people on a vast and damning scale. Do not be thrown off this point by the Distractor in Chief, who promised to "Make America great again." The massive infrastructure renewal projects promised in 2016 are nowhere to be found in 2018.

So, what is the Australian promise that I have pointed to in this article? I began my work on the land in 2006 while serving as a Senior Scholar on Fellowship with the Australian-American Fulbright Commission. I carried on a documentary using photography, audio field recordings, video and archival research, returning to Botany Bay over the course of ten years in order to track a longitudinal study of change as humans influenced the environment, economic and social forces. While in Australia, I met Les Bursill, the editor of *Doryanthes*. He changed how I thought about country, remarking in an interview that I conducted in July of 2015 to support my US exhibition of *Sounding Botany Bay*:

*We don't own the land; we are part of the land. We aren't here to prosper from the land, we are here to work in harmony with the land.*

This approach to culture and country is deeply held in Les, and it shifted my own thinking about my responsibilities to my own city, to the place where I am raising children. I had been focused for ten years on change at Botany Bay, while in my own city a slow motion breakdown of civic and personal responsibility had gutted our land. It was time to keep my own promise to country, to return home and intervene as best I could, using the tools that artists and documentary makers employ. In my experience, we Americans have trusted politicians and powerful interests to care for the places we were born into, and have stepped aside from our own personal and collective responsibility to leave the land and people better.

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<sup>48</sup> The Australian equivalent appears to be "terrace houses". (Editor)

<sup>49</sup> NBC's Meet the Press: 2010 Colorado Senate debate, Oct 17, 2010, [http://www.ontheissues.org/Economic/Michael\\_Bennet\\_Budget\\_+\\_Economy.htm](http://www.ontheissues.org/Economic/Michael_Bennet_Budget_+_Economy.htm)



A generation of change was marked just in my maternal grandfather's life. Caleb Myer knew the forest and creatures in his stream valley. He tended a garden, which supplied his table and the needs of his children and grandchildren. He fished and hunted, knew the seasons, set aside seed, and put up food for canning and drying racks for winter and bad times. He was born in a stone mill house in 1903, lived through the Great Depression and World Wars, and died in 1983. He stayed put on his land, he walked it, knew it intimately. During the 80 years of his life Americans forgot how to read the forest, renew gardens with compost, or save for bad times. We no longer kept screws and nails in coffee cans, no longer kept chisels and saw blades sharp, we stopped investing in the bridges, rail lines, and vast networks of pipes, which supplied fresh water and carried away the muck. We built vast wealth for a few, while many people slipped out of the middle class and meaningful civic life. We grew busy and lonely.

As the Black American 19<sup>th</sup> century activist Marcus Garvey noted<sup>50</sup>: *A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.* Through a tough look at our past roots and current conditions, we Americans need to learn some hard lessons for renewal, because business and politics as usual have led us to be uprooted, angry and separated from each other and the land. I am grateful to Les Bursill for helping me to see that so clearly, to demand change and accountability, to do some of the rewarding work of caring for the land and community good. This is a labour worth doing for the next generation coming up against climate disruption. It is my hope as well that Australians hold onto their values of mateship, while learning the lessons, which tens of thousands of years of Aboriginal culture and stewardship have taught on your own continent. I can think of no greater exemplar of hope and resiliency for humankind.

Prof. Timothy Nohe



The Baltimore city Council has admitted that more than 34,000 (US) Gallons of waste water or stormwater has leaked into Western Run. That is the equivalent of 128,704 litres (Aus).

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<sup>50</sup> Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, Majority Press, Dover, Massachusetts, 1986, ISBN 9780912469249