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## Regeneration<sup>i</sup>

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Figure 1. Photo by Andrew Thai, permission granted for use. Link: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bt9RAaCg-Yx/>

*“It’s almost like it was deliberately engineered for Instagram photos, but Melbourne’s pink lake is all natural and has turned rosy again.”<sup>1</sup>*

In February 2019, the salt lake in Melbourne’s Westgate Park became a social media sensation. Locals and tourists alike flocked to its shores to snap their selfies and marvel at the phenomenon – one that was widely purported as ‘all natural.’ In this short piece, we want to explore the history of Westgate Park in Melbourne through the framework of shadow-places, and in doing so, reveal the complicated processes of urban regeneration and the oft-buried politics of environmental management work. We look here to the relationships and practices that have brought Westgate Park to its current state in an attempt to shine a light on the shadows.

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<sup>1</sup> Noonan, “Melbourne’s Westgate Park.”

Formed through volcanic action 30 million years ago, Westgate Park was the site of sand accumulation for at least four thousand years prior to colonial invasion. It was the sand that made this part of Bunnerong Country appealing to invaders. After a brief foray with horse and car racing, the sand was extracted and carted away for a variety of uses. Having given up its mineral wealth, the site became a rubbish tip that helped absorb the waste of a growing colonial city, rendering its soils highly contaminated in the process. This growth helped to justify the construction of the Westgate Bridge, a project that was completed in 1978. While the park was seen by Art Truter, the bridge architect, as a complement to the bridge, the birds eye view as you crossed over the bay entrance offered a less than flattering view. Oscar Meyer and Art Truter stood on the bridge together, looked over this trashed landscape and said “this will be the place for a beautiful park.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1984, vast quantities of soil and fill were trucked into the site, with a sizeable portion of it coming from the excavation for the Como Cinema construction in South Yarra. Slopes and rises were sculpted and lakes were excavated. This work created an expansive urban parkland that offered lines of site to the bay, river and the city. This newly sculpted site was then planted out with showy and hardy species from Western Australia. Despite this investment of time and resources, the park fell into a period of neglect. Not until the late 1990’s was the park ‘rediscovered’ by Naomie Sunner during her trek along the length of the Birrung/Yarra. Naomie wanted to volunteer to regenerate the park, but in the absence of any existing community group, she started the Friends of Westgate Park. In 2018 The Friends of Westgate Park amalgamated with indigenous plant nursery SKINC (previously St Kilda Indigenous Nursery Cooperative) and changed their name to Westgate Biodiversity: Bili Nursery & Landcare (Bili is Boon wurrung for small lizard-like skink).<sup>3</sup>

Volunteers have poured countless hours and resources over decades into caring for the park and re-making a more locally-inspired ecology. They have created a biodiverse sanctuary and a rich multi-species community in an otherwise overlooked industrial zone. Yet the legacies of extraction and manipulation persist. The water table has been eviscerated by this extraction legacy, resulting in salt intrusion and the conditions that give rise to the now Insta-worthy pink lake phenomenon. Environmental change pushes regeneration work beyond the boundaries of the past. *Bili Nursery and Landcare* now plant species from the inner Melbourne sand-belt region, recognising there isn’t enough water to maintain the former salt marsh ecosystem in the longer term. This is a practical example of Plumwood’s encouragement to include places still to come as part of our responsibilities to place, in light of the uncertainties that climate change imposes on our present and future. And all the while legacies can haunt regeneration efforts - land management activities in Westgate Park are constrained by the toxic soils and scarce availability of water. The production of Westgate Park has become an experiment in terra-forming composed of material from subsequent processes of colonial capital accumulation. A material history of dispossession, extraction, toxicity and re-making that belies any material sense of place-singularity.

Reading this history through the shadow places lens helps to reframe the way that urban regeneration is imagined. As Val Plumwood states, we must “recognize the reality of multiple relationships to place but insist that they be reshaped as meaningful and responsible.”<sup>4</sup> We suggest that telling stories of the multiple making and unmaking of place offers a way to

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<sup>2</sup> Fisherman’s Bend, “Westgate park.”

<sup>3</sup> See <https://westgatebiodiversity.org.au/>

<sup>4</sup> Plumwood, “Shadow Places.”

expand our responsibilities to it. This is perhaps most evident when we consider the ethical complexities of ecological restoration and regeneration work that is being done in cities. Ecological baselines, notions of belonging and the role of people in ecosystems are complicated: first by the recognition of cultural landscapes that erodes the traditional Western nature/culture binary; second by the rapid transformations of the Anthropocene and accelerated climate-induced ecological shifts. Framed within settler-colonial or modernist, techno-fix narratives and removed from the specificities of place, regeneration practices can participate in ethically fraught activities, support narratives of denial and permit the evasion of industry and government accountability.

Westgate Park is a place of ongoing regeneration in terms of the re-making of an ecology that can once again nurture and be nurtured, but it is as much a story of 'generation' as it is regeneration. Urban sites in particular can lend themselves to particular narratives of redemption. Yet while legacies of extraction and toxicity can be moved, they can never be erased. We need to be aware that urban regeneration carries risks of silencing critical histories and creating new shadow places in processes often celebrated as a return to an idealised 'nature' absent of culture and human responsibility. The work itself is the result of volunteer labor woven into complex governance structures and participating in relationships of power and responsibility that serve some more than others. The concept of shadow places reminds us that this work is always political.

In the case of Westgate Park, the stories beyond that of 'naturalness' keep alive those that can easily slip into the shadows; those of dispossession, extraction, toxicity and responsibility. From this place, regeneration becomes as much about responsibility to these histories as much as to the regeneration of ecological systems. This is understood well by the active community of volunteers who care for this place, but it is a complexity easily lost in wider discourse.

We encourage reflection and practices that move regeneration work further from being understood as a feel-good simplistic return or fix, towards a practice that attends to those living legacies of individual places, including the webs of connection, politics, material and memory that they participate within.

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<sup>i</sup> Pearce, Lilian and Benjamin Cooke. “Regeneration.” *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020). <https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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