

# DOWN by the RIVER

I'm sitting directly behind Gough Whitlam Park, next to a half-submerged grey sedan that is wedged, boot first, into the Cooks River. The amateur detective in me says that it was pushed, not driven. It must have been at night because there would be too much foot traffic during the day. The lion on the front of the sedan is dusty brown, which happens to everything near to the river after a while. The plates have been removed. There are two cracks towards the bottom of the windscreen. The first is down near where the glass meets the bonnet, and the second is a little higher. Then there are long straight cracks near the centre of the glass, which look like a line drawing of a spider's web. In the middle of this spider web are indents, walloped by something from the outside. In the centre, the glass is like dust or crumbs. I detect a little joy in these shapes. I think that smashing the glass might have felt good. There is a cockatoo screeching above me, as well as a plane I can hear but cannot see.

The water has leaked in through the edges of the car. The boot is full, and both the car seats are underwater. There is a line of grimy bronze residue on the bonnet, showing how high the water has been. Large sandstone blocks line the edge of the river. One is dislodged and resting up against the headlight on the driver's side of the car. The aerial is poking up out of the water. The windscreen wipers are in their resting position. The river rises inside the car with the incoming tide. From my spot on the bank, I can see a school of tiny fish near the headlight on the passenger's side of the car. I can also see a larger fish that I want to call a toadfish, because it is beige grey with black stripes. It is the size of a mouse, with tiny little fins beating at its side.

I reckon a couple of people dumped this car together. They would've had to take the car across the basketball courts, past the play equipment, the cafe and the toilet block, and round behind the cricket oval. I can't help feeling that it would have been a huge disappointment for them that the river didn't take the car under. It's pretty shallow, particularly at the edges. In the middle, it could hide a car, but here on the sides the concealment is partial. It is the type of "hiding" that only draws more attention. Everyone can see it.

Now I'm on the bridge where New Canterbury Road crosses the Cooks River. Trucks and cars are tearing past. There is a grey Camry nose-first in the river below the bridge. The metal post and rail fence are smashed. Where the rails are missing, there are seven heavy-duty roadblocks, alternately orange and white with police danger tape on them. The tide is going out. Luckily the driver survived and was on the bank of the river when police arrived a little before 6am on the 28th August 2018. Part of the fence is piercing the windscreen. The car is covered with fine brown grit and a whole lot of mangrove seeds, and shea oak needles have built up in little clumps around the front bonnet of the car.

I have been studying the Cooks River for four years, watching the bed absorb metal, plastic, bricks and tyres. The Cooks is not the body of water that comes to mind when thinking about Sydney. It is technically a tidal estuary, not a river. The Cooks River flows twenty-three kilometres from Yagoona to Botany Bay. Rain gathers at the lowest points of a valley into a ribbon of water that meets with the brackish daily tides. Over its course, the water moves by Sydney's largest cemetery, suburban houses, Indigenous middens

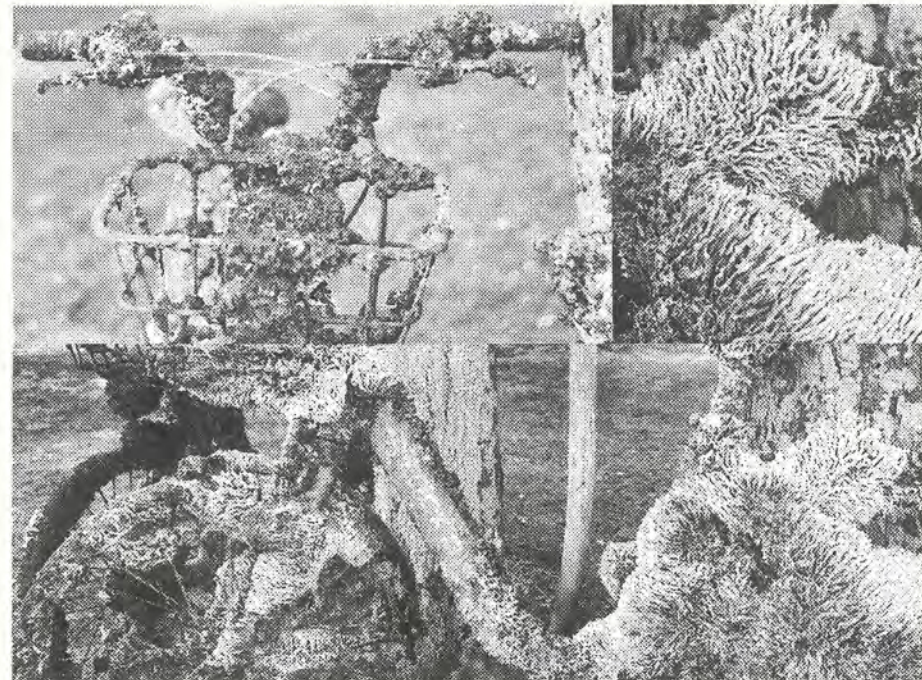


Image: Clare Britton

and cave shelters, an ice-skating rink and industrial areas. The river is named after Captain James Cook and its mouth was engineered a kilometre off-course, in the late 1940s, to make way for Sydney's Kingsford Smith International Airport.

In my experience, when people get excited talking about the Cooks River, it includes colourful descriptions of how it smells at low tide or of the remarkable things they have seen floating in the water. I have seen: cars; bikes; a Vespa; shopping trolleys and a matted sodden teddy bear that was larger than a person, face down, in the mangroves. Anecdotes I have heard include sightings of a lounge suite and dead animals — including a horse's head, a pig, and a number of dogs. To borrow from Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, by thinking about the Cooks River through the metaphor of a home, the Cooks River is more like looking down the back of Sydney's couch as opposed to greeting Sydney at its front door. As the Cooks River is somewhat unconsidered, it holds uncomfortable truths. Standing on the bank of the Cooks, its trajectory is hard to perceive as a whole. Despite the many colonial, urban and suburban compromises the Cooks River has absorbed (from its name to the engineering of its mouth to accommodate Sydney International Airport) the river is strangely beautiful. Its beauty is complicated and delicate. If you soften your eyes and look out along the water as the sun is setting, you might see a mullet throw itself out of the golden pinky water and imagine what it would feel like to swim down to Tempe railway station instead of walking there. If you look closely at the water you might notice a dense tangle of plastic, or a Keep Cup floating downstream, or you might make

out the shape of an O-Bike on the riverbed. Of course, this does not account for the pollution you can't see.

Last week, I made my way down to the Tempe River Canoe club. I have been heading out with The Mullets, a group of volunteers led by Bridget Cleaver who meet monthly to pull rubbish out of the river. The Cooks River has a strange nocturnal life where cars, teddy bears, wheelchairs, Vespas, and rideshare bikes find their way into the water. But this weekend, on arrival at the clubhouse, two rideshare bikes, a yellow O-Bike and a Reddy Go, had already been mysteriously exhumed from the river. The bikes were like small reefs covered in shells and plants, perhaps a couple of years of underwater growth. Maybe the tides are turning (so to speak) and the illicit night-time river activities will be about exposing and removing stuff from the river rather than concealing and filling the water with things that shouldn't be there. We sometimes have to make some tough choices: If a piece of rubbish is covered in oysters, perhaps it is just a part of the river now. 2020 has been overwhelming. I have found The Mullets to be a much-needed physical and tangibly positive way of acting now. Their details are below, if you'd like to join us!

I am trying to understand the river: its history and Sydney's relationship to it. I would like to celebrate nearly finishing my academic study by doing some very un-academic research. If you have ever pushed or driven something into the Cooks (even accidentally), or if you have fished something out, can you write in anonymously and tell me about it? I want all the details.

Clare Britton

The Mullets: <https://rivercanoecub.org.au/events/the-mullets-cooks-river-regular-cleanup/>



Clare Britton is an Australian artist interested in landscapes, collaborative practice and artworks that are visceral and sensory. Clare's PhD, *A Week on the Cooks River*, is currently under examination at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. Clare has worked at PACT as an artist, mentor and technician. [www.clarebritton.net](http://www.clarebritton.net)

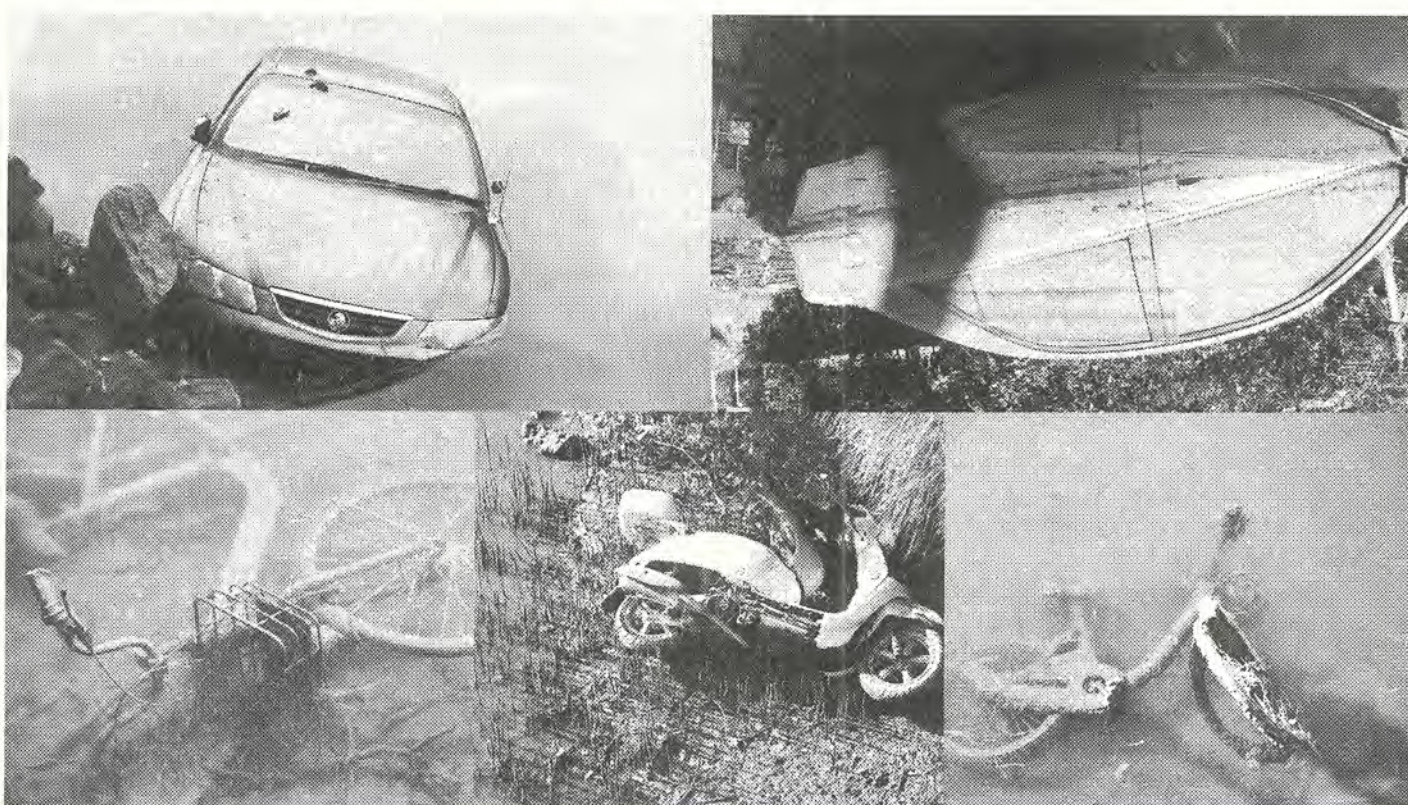


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