

Metabolism

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Metabolism is a film essay that considers the body-as-land and land-as-body. Over the course of nine months, Eugenia Lim spent time talking to and learning from Wadawurrung traditional custodians, researching the Western Treatment Plant (WTP), interacting with staff and observing the site. The resulting film considers metabolism as an ambivalent process that connects external and internal forces: from chemical energy-creation within our bodies, to capitalism's 'metabolic rift'.

For the Wadawurrung people, Wirribi-yaluk (Werribee river) is the backbone and spine of Country, a waterway that has sustained life since time immemorial. Wirribi-yaluk runs along the eastern edge of the WTP, a living and flowing entity connecting oldways with new. Since colonisation, the land, waters and air of this place have been drastically shaped to produce and metabolise food, waste, energy and water. The Plant was built in the 1880s, as the population increase caused by the Victorian gold rush necessitated a large-scale sewage system. Those in charge at the time were not concerned with the thoughts and opinions of the Indigenous custodians of this land and nearby river. However, Lim's research, guided by Wadawurrung cultural advisors Stephanie Skinner and Corinna Eccles, reveals the site as one of gathering, abundance, sustenance and burial.

Similarly to Aotearoa, where tangata whenua look to waterways as places with their own mauri, many First Nations Australians view their rivers as living ancestral beings. Here, the Whanganui awa was the first river in the world to gain legal personhood in 2017. In 2018 in Australia, the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council was established and recognised "the pre-existing and continuing legal authority of Indigenous laws – or 'First Law' – in relation to the River in order to preserve its integrity through a process of legal decolonisation."¹ In 2024, the Council's hard work resulted in Martuwarra being named the world's first living water museum according to UNESCO. Outcomes such as these are hard-won. In his well-known critique "The Limits of Self-Determination in Oceania", Terence Wesley-Smith deduces that the Indigenous population in Aotearoa and Australia struggle as we "fell completely outside of the decolonization rubric, because they happened to live in settler dominated colonies that had achieved political independence from Great Britain earlier in the century."²

Metabolism holds this history close. Throughout the film, Lim pays careful attention to the landscape, with long overhead shots exposing the vast outdoor area filled with human and more-than-human bodies as well as close ups of microorganisms inside a laboratory. As the camera lingers on birds and cows, among other living entities, we are shown the diverse lifeforms found at the WTP who are forced to exist amongst it. Created across seasons, in dialogue with the site-as-protagonist, *Metabolism* considers the interdependencies between

¹ Alessandro Pelizzon, Erin O'Donnell and Anne Poelina, "Australia's Rivers are Ancestral Beings" in *Pursuit*, 18 October 2021.

² Terence Wesley-Smith, "The Limits of Self-Determination in Oceania" in *Social and Economic Studies* 56, no. 1/2 (2007): 186).

human and more-than-human bodies, interior and exterior ecologies, and the consumption, colonisation and capitalisation of body-as-land.

Metabolism was filmed on and in the lands, waters and skies of the Wadawurrung. We pay our deep respect to the sovereign traditional custodians of this place for their deep, ongoing practice of care for country, kin and culture.