

In praise of (extra)ordinary journeys
by Neha Kale



Nadim Karam, *The Travellers*, 2005. Stainless steel tubing, motorised conveyance.
Commissioned by the City of Melbourne and the Victorian government, 2005. City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection, Sandridge Bridge precinct, Melbourne. Photo: Patrick Rodriguez

1

Back in Melbourne for work a couple of years ago, I found myself on a daily commute that's synonymous with life in the city — one that I'd somehow avoided in the half-decade I'd lived in a ground-floor apartment just a ten-minute tram ride away.

I'd leave my hotel at 8am, amble west down Flinders Street, past hole-in-the-wall locksmiths, the novelty donut place, the vegan French-fry vendor that's the barometer for the city's nocturnal cravings. At the lights, I joined the throng of workers wielding coffee cups (stamped with words like Proud Mary, St Ali, roaster's provenance reading like religious allegiance) as they descended into a yellowing underpass. A few minutes later, it spat us out beside the Yarra. I stopped to take in the glassy skyscrapers that lined Southbank, the sun sending a light show across the water, a series of sculptures that hovered atop a footbridge. Their skeleton bodies let in scraps of sky, bisecting the taupes and greys of nearby buildings. *How long have they been there?* I wondered, re-joining the parade of commuters making their way along the river via Flinders Walk as the morning trains rattled by.

2

In Melbourne, defining encounters occur in non-places. It's the term the French theorist Marc Augé uses to describe airports, malls and highways, unremarkable spaces designed for arrival, exits and transit.¹ It also applies to laneways, rooftops and bridges, the secret portholes of the city, sites where — if you journey through them with any regularity — the ordinary and the extraordinary tend to collide.

Ascending a rickety staircase to arrive at bar that overlooked Degraes Street, which has since become Melbourne's most Instagrammed laneway, was an initiation into a world of adult knowledge, at least the type I chased as a 24-year-old.

Watching dusk blanket Robert Hoddle's grid from the rooftop of an Art Nouveau building on Swanston Street means witnessing how the daily rhythms of a city accrete into the grand arc of history.

Alighting on the Sandridge Bridge and walking past *The Travellers*, a set of sculptures created by the Lebanese artist Nadim Karam to symbolise the waves of immigration that have shaped Melbourne is a reminder that a place is always rewriting itself. The towering, stainless-steel figures, which are designed to move through the day like the hands of a clock are a reminder that time is never linear. Even the most ordinary commute across a city is haunted by ghosts of travellers whose extraordinary journeys brought them here.

3

The Sandridge Bridge, an example of steel girder construction spanning 178.4 metres, was built in 1888 by David Munro, a colonial architect who immigrated to Victoria in 1854 on a ship called the Tudor. The bridge, which abuts Yarra Falls, the point at which the river's supply of freshwater becomes saltwater was once — at least until it was blown up in the 1880s, to make way for the boom! of the Goldrush — a meeting place for the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. It was also part of the historic railway that connected Port Melbourne and Flinders Street Station, ferrying passengers who left far-flung places — England and Ireland and later, Poland, Croatia, Greece and Italy — towards new lives.

The stories of these voyages are enshrined in monuments and photographs, in SBS documentaries and exhibitions at the Immigration Museum. They're recounted through the generations, at family barbecues, until they ossify, take on a mythic solidity. At some angles, *The Travellers* resemble totems: *Walker and his Tucker Bag* symbolise those who came here to find work in faraway mines and baking-hot factories, *The Running Couple*, a talisman for those who fled war-ravaged villages, left behind parents, lovers, livelihoods.

They stand on a bridge suspended between Melbourne's past and present, staunch, immovable and frozen in time.

4

As an immigrant, I'm prone to using journey as metaphor, to mining origin stories for portent. To living with the knowledge that every monument to arrival also contain the shadows of departure; every attempt to plant roots means scattering the seeds of future loss.

In Nam Le's *The Boat*, a Vietnamese refugee called Mai forges an emotional connection with a boy who's the vision of her father on a boat to Australia, only to lose him to the elements. (I read it on that consummate non-place, a cruise ship, the grief coiled up in the story unfurling in time with the angry, rolling Pacific.)

In "Parents", an episode of the Netflix show, *Master of None*, Aziz Ansari's father, Ramesh moves to New York City from India to work as a doctor to endure rejections from a son who'll never reckon with his sacrifice.

My family's own immigrant origin story, which involves a plane tossed like a toy a stormy Perth night has taken on such mythic proportions in my own head, I'd swear it was a story I made up — if I still didn't miss the people we left behind.

¹ <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jread2/Auge%20Non%20places.pdf>

Here's multicultural Melbourne in numbers. 36.7 percent of Melburnians are overseas-born.² The city is home to 251 different languages,³ including Greek, Italian, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Cantonese and Arabic. The south-east suburb of Clayton is the most culturally diverse place in Australia, a neighbourhood of people that hail from 112 countries.

If, as Marcus Westbury puts it in his June 2016 essay, *Finding Melbourne*, the city is shaped by the contrasts between the grand and granular than surely the ordinariness of the immigrant experience is worth as much attention as extraordinary journeys and epic voyages, of abandoning homelands and consigning your future to a country at the edge of the world?

"Foreignness is a planetary condition, and even when you walk through your hometown—whether that's New York or London or Sydney—half the people around you are speaking in languages and dealing in traditions different from your own," writes Pico Iyer, in *Foreign Spell*. For so many of us, the act of leaving is less about the journeys we've mythologised and more about the regular act of living in the places we've chosen while honouring the places that have helped make us who we are.

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The Travellers – citycollection.melbourne.vic.gov.au/the-travellers

The Travellers fact sheet - <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/travellers-fact-sheet.pdf>

City Collection – citycollection.melbourne.vic.gov.au

Public Art and Memorials Map - citycollection.melbourne.vic.gov.au/public-art-and-memorials-map

² <https://liveinmelbourne.vic.gov.au/discover/melbourne-victoria/about-melbourne>

³ <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/melbourne-language-study-reveals-a-cacophony-of-diversity-20140711-zt4b4.html>