

Moss as Metonym

by Alexandra Crosby, Ilaria Vanni, Jo Paterson Kinniburgh

A metonym is a figure of speech that transfers the meaning of a word to another based on a relation of proximity, either material, spatial or causal. For instance, 'breaking a sweat' meaning 'to work hard', 'Canberra' to signify the Australian government, or 'he turned red' to indicate the embarrassment that causes a white person to blush. Metonyms are, said differently, full of material power.

Thinking with moss as a metonym leads to a form of embodied and sensory learning. Thinking and walking with moss, we refocus our attention on the here and now: the bank of the canal, the large rocks on the mangrove edge, the shady patch in the back garden. A here and now made of localized encounters and trajectories that unfurl in all directions, in time and space. Moss is metonymic because it creates material and spatial links between the watery ecologies and the urban spaces of Sydney.

In metonyms, we read in Muraro's *Maglia o Uncinetto* (Knitting or Crochet, 1981, reprinted in 2004, translated by the authors):

The relationship between the figurative and literal meaning coincides with a material link, either a spatial, or a temporal or causal link... The specificity of metonymy... consists in its taking shape through discovered rather than invented links. These links can be of any kind, provided that they are established not through pure thought, but that they come to us as already given (formed). While metaphor springs from an original idea, metonym makes its own way through lived experience. Thanks to metaphor, existence is molded into an ideal representation, while with metonym it is articulated in its various parts. (Muraro, 2004: 54)

As a metaphor, moss is like carpet because it is textured, ubiquitous, and often underfoot. With metaphors, 'we theorize, conceptualize, abstract, substitute, represent. We put words in the place of things.' With metonyms, on the other hand, we 'combine, associate, link, move from context to context, allude, narrate: things and words make sense through references and associations accompanying them.' (Dominijanni 2004: 12)

Metonyms substitute one thing for another through association and embodied knowledge. A metonym, explain George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2008: 36), has 'primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to stand for another'. In our imaginations, we can swap out concepts, back and forth. Metonyms work with contiguity, for instance 'I am having a cuppa' for 'I am drinking coffee'.

Since moss grows on surfaces and also enacts contiguity, we can follow it in cities to think of what kind of metonyms it shows us in urban spaces.

To be more concrete, I (Ilaria Vanni) learned as a kid in Italy that if I got lost I could look on which side of tree trunks moss was growing, and that would be North, so moss was an orientation device and a friend.

I (Alexandra Crosby) learned as a kid in Australia that the yard was mossy and wild where the tap dripped. There was AstroTurf in the yard of the house next door, and, on the other side, mowed lawn and a swimming pool. Across the road, a high pressure water blaster kept the tiles shiny and moss-free. Moss in that neighborhood was people's relationship to water.

I (Jo Paterson Kinniburgh) scrambled in shadowy, damp leaf litter in New Zealand. I held my breath and hoped we might spot a Paryphanta, a locally endemic predatory snail. The native mosses meant habitat.

Working with metonyms today in our city, on Dharawal Country, we think about what is visible, and what is not; what things stand in for another, surfacing, obscuring, erasing and replacing.

Flowing inland from the Cooks River to our research site of Green Square, and out to Gamay, Botany Bay, Alexandra Canal stands in for Sheas Creek, but the creek is also a metonym for a dynamic watery place, for salt marshes and ephemeral wetlands. Rather than a metaphor for colonialism, the canal is a metonym for terraforming: straightening, containing and undergrounding water to fulfill the goals of industry (Vanni, Crosby and Foster 2022).

Together, all these metonyms create a living archive of a watery place. Rolling stones collect no moss, but living archives do. When we work with metonyms, the archive is more than chronological, the heritage is more than history. The archive gathers stories and connects them in watery ways. It grows as it draws communities around it. To us, this archive disappears and reappears, not dying, but receding from human awareness. It has many ways to communicate.

As Jennifer Gabrys explains, the proliferation of mosses in the cracks of hard surfaces signals nature in the city (in her case London), and is often read as a 'return' of nature. But moss, like rats, bats, spiders, ibis and casuarinas, do not simply 'return' to the city. Such species adapt and form alliances, recombining into new urban ecologies that can flourish with the conditions created by hard surfaces, disturbed ground, pollution and artificial light.





In Sydney, two species dominate the mosscape, neither Indigenous nor apologetic. These are probably the same mosses we knew as children, common on our different sides of the world.

Rather than originating anywhere in particular, these mosses 'become urban as part of the urban political ecologies in which they are situated and to which they contribute' (Gabrys 2012, p. 2925). Mossy archives are therefore not descriptions of unidirectional human-nature relationships progressing and developing. Mossy archives fill spaces, moving forward and back in time.

Standing in for wetlands, moss does not signal the 'return' of Country. Moss has no time for colonial nostalgic indulgences. Rather, it signals that Country was always there, 'under the concrete' (Foster and Kinniburgh, 2020) in the soil, air, water, and stories.

Houston et al. argue for the creation of 'good' cities, which are planned, designed and inhabited with multispecies entanglements in mind. These entanglements, with moss, or any other lifeform, challenge us to 'consider not only other lives and organisms but also the geological strata, air and waters which form the earth. Differences become points of encounter rather than of consumption, closure or exclusion' (2018, p. 201). A mossy city may not yet be a good city, but surely it is better than a mossless city.

Moss is growing everywhere in this archive of Sydney. It protects and reproduces and rematriates. We might see the moss as the matter between soil and water. Damp. Swamp. Marsh. Bog. Wetlands. A sign. A friend. Kin. We might press our toes into urban moss and be on Country.

We might do all this, but in the watery cracks of Australia's largest urban renewal project, the legacies of colonialism shape our relations to water. We look into the Alexandra Canal from above, noticing the moss growing in the sandstone brickwork, but we are prohibited from climbing down amongst it. The canal cannot be 'rewilded', it is already wildly industrialized. In 2003 the Department of Environment and Climate Change declared it too dangerous to disturb because of the toxic sludge that lay at its bottom. All the speculative designs, future scenarios, architectural drawings placing people pleasantly in urban nature were set aside. The moss in Alexandra Canal doesn't indicate a return to nature. It is a metonym for the wetlands, forever undergrounded by colonial infrastructure.

Despite this, moss forms alliances. Attuning to mosses as a metonym for wetlands is a way to notice existing alliances and to create new ones.

Following the Moss

Walking with moss is part of our commitment to a practice of connecting 'with the minute, everyday ecologies on city edges' (Vanni and Crosby, 2023a 166).

We experiment with our cameras and phones to focus, frame and magnify. We crouch down, lean against tree trunks and contort our bodies so that light reaches the damp shadowy edges with the best specimens. We laugh at damp knees and share photographs with each other and our networks. In this one, the stobilus is sharp. In that one, the sunlit color is true like the afternoon it was taken.

As we have written elsewhere 'we start from the premise that there is a correlation between how people see, sense and perceive the environment and how they treat it.' (Vanni & Crosby 2023b). To test this at a micro scale, we try 'moss bathing'. As with 'forest bathing' (Sherwood 2019), the idea is that by looking at plants, you will feel more connected to nature and more at ease. Our logic, however, expects more from moss lovers than a well-being check. We propose that if we follow it, moss can guide us to relate to urban wetlands as the climate changes, to understand cities as watery, to see our own role in the care of urban waterways and living archives.

As we bathe our eyes in moss, we think more about Gabrys' experiments. She describes walking with a 'moss-eye view', cultivating a perspective on London in alliance with moss. 'Mosses', she writes, 'are in-between and peripheral organisms that work across material, affective, political, socionatural, and imaginative registers of sites.' (2021, 2923). A moss-eye view does not simply mean focusing on an individual species to generate a novel visual encounter with London. Instead, it 'works toward new understandings of how collective urban embodiments unfold within and through more-than-human processes.' (2926)

Moss incorporates the material effects of urban ecologies across time and space, and thus forms a process of bio-indication in the city, capturing pollutants and making resources available for other organisms. Mosses in the city might be studied as sentient, more-than human exchangers of and participants in urban energies, and as in-between and peripheral organisms that connect up sites by working across material, affective, political, socionatural, and imaginative registers. (2012, p. 2933)

We keep following the moss to create an urban imaginary that can connect the wetlands of the urban renewal site of Green Square to the rest of the Sydney basin. We must think beyond the arbitrary geographical borders of the area, conveniently drawn for property development, but

obfuscating the way water flows here. At Sydney Park, once an industrial waste site, now a series of artificial wetlands, water features, landscaped

gardens and a dog pool, moss grows in the finger-sized spaces between the grid of the fiberglass walkways.

At Tempe reserve we circle the dark ambiguous body of water that feels both like an industrial wasteland and a civic ecology. We follow concrete pipes and climb through orange barricades. Moss is infrastructure too, we propose to each other, to the kookaburras and the dogs on leashes...back at home, we examine our photographs and download a pdf of Flora of Australia, Volume 51: Mosses 1 (2006): 'twisted moss' and 'common tree apron moss' are in abundance.

Along the Cooks River in a different postcode, we are connected to the Alexandra Canal by the stories we have followed. The mossiest place is where a stream drips down a sandstone wall, part of the foundations of an award winning architecturally designed home overlooking the river. Even in the driest of weeks, these rocks are damp, sheltering mosses and ferns from the harsh sun. Moss-bathing at this spot, we also feel sheltered. Our eyes adjust to the darkness, focusing on the greenness of the delicate stems and roots. Inhaling, we register the dampness of the air here. Our fingers can't resist. They reach out to press the springy formations of the growth in all directions.

Mossy Prompts

- Do you live in a watery city?
- Do you live in a city in which wetlands waterscapes and waterways are undergrounded?
- Can moss help you see the water stories of your city?
- Can it make visible the estuaries and tributaries of deep time?
- Take ten days to follow and observe moss. You will need to walk each day, for at least twenty minutes. Follow moss in an urban environment. Photograph as much moss as possible in this time. Stop and examine\surround\touch\record\document. Choose 10 images of moss and create an album. Name the album with a metonym for moss. Share with #mossymetonym.

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