



Migrating Ears:  
Kris Hemensley's *The  
Merri Creek, Or, Nero*  
and *H/EAR*, with some  
brief comments on the  
earlier publications *Our  
Glass, Earth Ship*, and  
*The Ear in a Wheatfield*

AMONG THE NEIGHBORS

Tim Wright

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The following article places its focus on two poetry publications edited by Kris Hemensley in the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s: *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero* and *H/EAR*. To give a clear picture of these publications, however, we first need to zoom out in order to see the broader series of which they form one part. Hemensley's first poetry publication, *Our Glass*, was a twopage gestetnered<sup>1</sup> newsletter—increasing to five double-sided pages by the final edition—of which seven issues in total were published; the first in May 1968, the final in June 1969. In contrast to Hemensley's later magazines, this was primarily a Melbourne publication, though it did publish poetry from and carry notices for publications further afield. *Our Glass* coincided with and reflected the manic fervour of the period of the early La Mama poetry readings, which brought together many of the younger poets in Melbourne at the time, in a small theatre in Carlton (an inner suburb of Melbourne).<sup>2</sup> Something of the thrill of the early new Australian poetry “moment,” and of the associated emergence of various poetry little mags and the network of communication developing between these, is palpable in its pages. The text is typewritten with the occasional note handwritten straight to stencil. The politics is countercultural, with an awareness of issues such as Aboriginal

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<sup>1</sup> A form of mimeograph invented by David Gestetner in 1891.

<sup>2</sup> La Mama Theatre was established in 1967 by Betty Burstall as a home for independent theatre. In 1968 and 1969 Kris Hemensley organised a poetry reading series at the theatre called the “Poets Workshop” which became a focal point for new and experimental poetry in Melbourne. Though La Mama's main theatre building was devastated by a fire in May 2018, the theatre continues to operate, staging productions in nearby venues. For more on the Poet's Workshop see Kris Hemensley, “The Beginnings—a note on La Mama,” *Applestealers*, North Fitzroy: Outback Press, 1974, pp. 15-19, and reproduced in the *Journal of Poetics Research*, No. 1, September 2014, ed. John Tranter

land rights and more specifically the then ongoing Gurindji Strike or Wave Hill Walk Off (1966-1975): “GO-GO-GO GURINDJI LAND RIGHTS N O W” we read in the corner of issue two’s cover page, alongside a column offering some brief reflections on a recent Melbourne demonstration (“altho melb. isnt the sorbonne this doesnt mean that the paris attitudes are nonexistent here”). A consistent theme of *Our Glass* is protest against still prevalent national censorship, of literature in particular. The final edition’s editorial contains a list of books restricted in Australia “at one time or another,” including *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, titles by Olson, Ferlinghetti, Snyder, and Ginsberg. The editorial ends presciently, “Surely this cannot go on—the lid must blow off—perhaps a Free Words and Thoughts campaign is needed...”<sup>3</sup>

In August 1969, two months after the final edition of *Our Glass*, Kris and Retta Hemensley departed Melbourne for Southampton, England, and it’s here that Hemensley’s magazine series properly begins, with the publication *Earth Ship* (13 issues, October 1970-October 1972). While Hemensley’s magazines will change titles from hereon, *Earth Ship* remains the name and “point of origin” for the overall series, in a sense containing the publications that follow. In the period of *Earth Ship* magazine, Hemensley began to form connections with a number of the new British and U.S. poets, a network he would very consciously bring back when he returned to Australia. *Earth Ship*’s first issue was based around Hemensley’s correspondence with Colin Symes, his “James Joyce letters,” written while travelling in Ireland. The magazine convened a special issue on women poets from the UK and the U.S. (No. 12, October 1972), which included writing from Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Miriam Solan, and Carolee Schneeman, as well as publishing

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<sup>3</sup> Kris Hemensley, editorial, *Our Glass*, No. 7, June 1969.

single issues devoted to the poetry of John Thorpe, Larry Eigner, and Harry Guest. One of the most impressive single pieces in *Earth Ship*, included with its first issue, is a modernist poetry chart by Colin Symes titled “poettree”: “a flow chart of all of the modernist connections, in which we would be also somewhere situated, right at the tail end of it.”<sup>4</sup> With the dimensions of a large, old-style touring map (unfolded, it measures 77 x 103 centimetres, or 31 x 41 inches), the chart moves from Les Imagistes, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein, at upper left, through Black Mountain, then to Cid Corman, Larry Eigner, Denise Levertov, and Gael Turnbull at bottom right. There are many intervening points on the map, most of these names of individual authors, editors, and publishers or schools, each followed by a short description.<sup>5</sup> Travelling around and between each of these nodes is a band of lines, resembling those of a metro map, and on which there are various arrows indicating the direction of influence between two points.

The next magazine in the series, appearing after the Hemensleys’ return to Melbourne, is *The Ear in a Wheatfield* (twenty issues, May 1973-December 1977). *The Ear* was one of the major forces for the “new” in Australian poetry in the 1970s, largely due to its dedicated internationalist-modernist approach. “Internationalist” should be understood here primarily as

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<sup>4</sup> Kris Hemensley, author interview with Kris and Retta Hemensley at Collected Works Bookshop, July 22, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Series editor’s note: The “poettree” features a vast cast of people active across the various scenes of modernism, including many small press and little magazine editors: Jane Heap, Margaret Anderson, Sylvia Beach, Robert McAlmon, William Bird, Sydney and Violet Schiff, A.R. Orage, Dora Marsden, and Harriet Shaw Weaver. A limited edition of the “poettree” is to be reproduced as a special installment of the *Among the Neighbors* series, with the permission of Colin Symes and Kris Hemensley.

naming an editorial program that consciously pushed beyond national boundaries understood to be confining and diminishing, rather than being or claiming to be in any sense encompassing or representative. Indeed, Hemensley describes *The*

*Ear*'s first two issues—which included translations by Peter Riley of Francis Ponge and by Walter Billeter of Paul Celan—as establishing an orientation that was “dual Anglo-American and European modernist.”<sup>6</sup> *The Ear* directly influenced other important Australian poetry and art magazines such as Ken Bolton's *Magic Sam* (1975-1980, co-edited at different times with Anna Couani and Sal Brereton), which, while very different in tone, took a similar internationalist-modernist approach. The first issue of *The Ear* opens with adjacent obituaries for Ezra Pound and the Australian poet Charles Buckmaster, both of whom had died the previous year, Buckmaster at age twentyone. This juxtaposition now stands as emblematic for the magazine's attempt to draw international currents alongside local ones, without privileging one over the other; and Hemensley was very much aware of its significance, writing about it twelve years later: “The terms of that equation, & there are many, encompassed what I perceived the new Australian poetry's relationship with the English and American to be. I was interested in equivalence (Bruce Beaver's word), in conjunctions, connections, correspondences, irrespective of literary status & style.”<sup>7</sup> The political context had changed dramatically from the late 1960s period of *Our Glass* and the early La Mama poetry readings; the preoccupation with censorship of only four years before appears—from the 1973 perspective—to be one of a prior epoch. In December 1972, a

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<sup>6</sup> Kris Hemensley, “Introduction,” *The Best of the Ear: The Ear in a Wheatfield 1973-1976: A Portrait of a Magazine*, Melbourne: Rigmarole, 1985, p. 10. <sup>7</sup> Ibid.

national Labour government was elected, ending the conservative reign of the previous twenty-three years, and quickly started to enact a series of progressive reforms. Something of the spirit of this period may be detectable in *The Ear*'s self-confidence and in its receiving funding from the Literature Board. It might also be detected in its movement beyond "Anglo-U.S. international-ism" with the series of four issues, in 1974, on the theme of the Pacific (a region still, curiously, neglected as it might pertain to something called "Australian writing"); of this series Hemensley later wrote, "it was the idea of grouping the writing in English (including translations) of Australia, New Zealand, Japan, & by extension the US, Canada, Britain, Europe, that attracted me. The presentation of a poetic analog of the geo-political 'here.'"<sup>7</sup> The second-last instalment of *The Ear*, titled "Nothing Between The Ears," consists of responses by various poets and editors to different questions posed by Hemensley, about, for example, "the state of writing in Australia," "women and writing," and "the emigrant situation." Presented in six stapled batches, in form and aims it directly anticipates *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero*, the first issue of which would be published the following year.

Discussing some of the above history in 2017, Hemensley provided a brief chronology of the different magazines and some of their presiding ideas and contexts. The late 1960s period of *Our Glass* and *La Mama* was characterised by what he called the desire to "break through," to establish and make visible the work of the younger (or simply "new") poets on the scene, this desire to break through being consonant with the many other youth movements against establishment structures

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<sup>7</sup> Kris Hemensley, "Introduction," *The Best of the Ear: The Ear in a Wheatfield 1973-1976: A Portrait of a Magazine*, Melbourne: Rigmarole, 1985, p. 11.

which were underway at the time. From here, the interest moved to poetics, and then to the more internationalist publishing networks of the 1970s, exemplified by *The Ear*:

I think it's like circles: "break through," in Melbourne, to say who we are, announce ourselves, and everybody was welcome—at La Mama to read, and in the little magazines to publish. Then that refined, even within one or two years... And you realise that there was an inner La Mama group, that was the La Mama poetics. And then there were other people that of course were welcome, they were part of the community. Then we go to England, so then it becomes part of the English scene, and it's international to the extent that the new English poetry had its international references, its non-Anglo references. Very heavily into translation, which was totally absent here. Then we come back, in late '72 early '73, Betty Burstall says, Would you like to do La Mama again? I said, No. I said, It's gone. The me who did that has gone, I'm much more into linking Australian work with the rest of the world. So now it's an internationalist thing. It's no longer a local thing, that's been established or other people continued to do it, I'm no longer in breakthrough mode, it's happened. So then, *The Ear in a Wheatfield* is a genuinely international magazine... Then it becomes, as you say, there's that political moment, there's a threat to everything. And so, how is one going to keep—one's going to keep going in spite of this, be who one is, right in the middle of this storm, this potential storm, this end of the world.<sup>8</sup>

It is the latter "end of the world" period that will be the focus of the rest of this article, the "threat to everything" being of course the existential threat of nuclear war. The two magazines of this period are *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero*, and *H/EAR*. In both, *correspondence* has become the motivating idea—that is,

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<sup>8</sup> Kris Hemensley, author interview with Kris and Retta Hemensley at Collected Works Bookshop, July 22, 2017.

above poetry, or poems, even while both publications also contain much that is *not* correspondence (poems, critical and other kinds of prose, visual art inserts). Normatively understood as an intimate mode of communication between two people and as secondary to literary writing proper, in these publications the letter is pushed into a more central and public role. By “revealing” letter writing in this way, the two publications sometimes bring to mind a piece of fabric turned outwards to show its stitching, and in this sense they are congruent with a more general turn towards showing “process” and “construction” in 1970s art and poetry. Their pages are chatty, polyphonic, often dense, often self-referential in the sense that the published letters often draw on and respond to work contained in previous issues.

The three issues of *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero* each consist of a large format envelope containing various printed materials.

Hemensley describes the publication’s form in the introduction to the first issue as “Simply, a collection of papers in an envelope, addressed to known recipients & available to readers who specifically require it”; he goes on to cite precursors of this envelope form: “Peter Hoy’s loose page publications (the angelological notebooks of Anthony Conran, & Llanfair..., out of Oxford, UK), Anthony Barnett’s The Literary Supplement (out of Norway), & one issue of Paul Buck’s Curtains (A Range of Curtains, out of Yorkshire, UK).”<sup>9</sup> By the third and final instalment of *Merri Creek* in 1980 it is evident that there is a tension developing between a desired openness (that is, an openness towards “those who specifically require it”) and breadth of the correspondence network on the one hand, and the corresponding size of each issue, and consequent weight and

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<sup>9</sup> Kris Hemensley, “dear Reader,” *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero* 1, September 1977.

postage price on the other. The introduction to *Merri Creek 3* includes a list of correspondents, whose letters Hemensley had wanted to include abridged, but could not for reasons of space.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the *Merri Creek* envelopes, *H/EAR* was a bound publication and thereby more recognizably a “little mag”; issues were of 100-150 pages, stapled, with wraparound silkscreened covers. Despite these differences, *Merri Creek* and *H/EAR* were continuous in aims and spirit. They were referred to by Hemensley both as the “project/correspondence,” and as an “active archive.” “Project/correspondence” and “activearchive” can be seen as the two axes of the *Merri Creek-H/EAR* period, the first proposing a more open and transparent connection between writer and reader, the second a renovated idea of the archive and what it might mean, or make available, with regard to literary activity. The “active-archive” echoes the title of Ezra Pound’s *Active Anthology* (1933), displaying the modernist spirit which pervades Hemensley’s approach: seen in

This has proved impossible, given the size of the package, & the resources available. However, i’ll attempt to describe the correspondence. Missives from Jaz Duke, Sam Schoenbaum (NY), Corinne Cantrill (Melbourne), Alexandra Seddon (NSW), Barrett Watten (SF), Paul Buck (UK), Giulia Nicolai, (Milan), Chris Mann (Vic), POLICY magazine (at that time, Sydney), Colin Symes (Brisbane), Tane (NSW), Anna Couani (Sydney), Alex Selenitsch (Melb), Robert Whyte (Bris), Nick Zurbrugg (Bris), Duncan McNaughton (Bolinias), Tim Burns (Syd), Anna Banana (SF), John Robinson (London), Cory Harding (Lon), Michael Kohler (Munich), Ken Edwards (London), Robert Bertholf (NY), Gabriel Maes (Antwerp), Paul Auster

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<sup>10</sup> To give an indication of the Hemensleys’ correspondence network at the time, and the importance of names and attribution in the project/correspondence more broadly, this list and its introduction read: “I did want to include ten pages or so of abridged letters & reports from correspondents.

(NY), Leith Morton (Syd), Bob Ramsay (Adelaide), Ken Bolton (NSW), Paul Kahn (Mass.), Allen Fisher (Lon), Anthony Rudolf (Lon), Harry Hoogstraten (Amsterdam), Noel Sheridan (Adelaide), James Sherry (NY), Marc Harshman (West Virginia), David Miller (Lon), George Alexander (Syd/& NY), &, naturally, from all the contributors to this present issue...& from the editor/publishers of the books & magazines Received...Even as i type this (off the cuff of course), more people come to mind whose responses, rejoinders, messages were also part of the year's project, such as Erica Callan (Syd), Pamela Brown (NSW), Meaghan Morris (Syd), Terry Reid (Syd), Pat Larter (Syd), Ti Parks (Lon), & Robert Varlez (Belgium), Christopher Meckel (Berlin), Ken Bullock (SF)."

Hemensley goes on to describe some of the themes of the correspondence. Kris Hemensley, "dear Reader," *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero* 3, February/May 1980.

the formal experiment with the structure of the magazine, as in the consistent self-reflection in editorials regarding what the magazine should (and should not) become. The two ideas are in productive tension. Where the "archive" side prioritizes documentation and conservation, the "active" side champions the "now." Effectively, the archive—conventionally understood as safely located in the "ever after" (and hence, not something one need to worry about)—was being transposed to, or synced up with, a more lived-with, everyday time; that is, the rhythm of the magazine's publication. The "project/correspondence," more or less self-explanatory, named the *Merri Creek-H/EAR*'s mission statement as one concerned with making contact with others across barriers of nation and to some degree language, and thereby enriching literary networks. The ambition and sincerity of this task stands out in a period in which communication via internet technology is pervasive and quotidian, and yet it is not difficult to see in *Merri CreekH/EAR*'s turn toward a more "networked" approach a

prefiguring of web-based forms such as the blog and the listserv, specifically the Buffalo Poetics Listserv (1993-2014).<sup>11</sup>

These two ideas or models for poetry journal publishing—“active archive” and “project/correspondence”—emerged out of Hemensley’s frustration with the conventional journal or magazine format that *The Ear in a Wheatfield* (along with most other poetry serial publications) had adopted.<sup>12</sup> His declaration that his magazines would never again take the “shopwindow”<sup>13</sup> approach is expressed in the first issue of the *Merri Creek*: “It will never again propose any kind of comprehensivity. It won’t ever again attempt to be a shopwindow for any impoverished parish.”<sup>14</sup> This mission statement was reprised in the first issue of *H/EAR* in 1981, adding, among other points, that “it’s not ‘poem’ or ‘story’ I’m leaving, but that literary activity that continues to aver its immunity from the transmissions of other disciplines, media, cultural & political contexts, & the daily ‘realm of the senses.’”<sup>14</sup> The idea for what *Merri Creek-H/EAR*

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<sup>11</sup> Important distinctions would however need to be drawn between preinternet and net-based forms, particularly with regard to “materiality.” One can “lurk” on an email list, but with a network such as *Merri Creek-H/EAR* active participation through letter writing, responding to work appearing in previous issues, was more or less obligatory in order to keep receiving the publications in the mail.

<sup>12</sup> A small selection of other Australian “new” poetry little magazine titles or alike serial publications or projects, published between 1968 and the mid-

<sup>13</sup> s: Richard Tipping and R.H. Tillett’s *Mok*, Walter Billeter and John Jenkins’s *Etymospheres*, Charles Buckmaster’s *The Great Auk*, Robert Kenny’s *Rigmarole of the Hours*, Ken Bolton, Anna Couani, and Sal Brereton’s *Magic Sam*, ΠΟ’s *Fitzrot*, SK Kelen’s *Final Taxi Review*, John Forbes’ *Surfers Paradise*.

<sup>14</sup> Kris Hemensley, “dear Reader,” *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero* 1, September/October 1977.

<sup>14</sup> Kris Hemensley, “Dear Reader,” *H/EAR* 1, August 24, 1981.

publication *would* do (as opposed to what it would not) is articulated in the introductions to several issues—and this redescription and reiteration of the project is itself significant, highlighting its iterative approach, and its sensitivity toward any sign or symptom of the conventional. The following is from the final issue of *H/EAR* in 1985:

H/EAR is a “project-correspondence”; that is to say, it is the active-archive of a certain Melbourne literary practice, at home with itself (here) & happy to receive (hear) interstate and overseas materials. H/EAR invites correspondence on any(thing) current in the series; and this correspondence may indeed comprise poetry, fiction, commentary, criticism, letters, documents.<sup>15</sup>

A longer and question-heavy missive, “R.S.V.P.” appears in *Merri Creek*’s third instalment in 1980, the last before its transition to *H/EAR* in 1981. The piece shows Hemensley staunchly holding open the “openness” of the publication, or more practically, the question of which direction to go in next, while at the same time reasserting the aims of the overall project/correspondence:

...This is not a magazine, that is to say, it is not advertising for work, it is not interested in poems, or essays, or petitions, or letters per se. It is a project/correspondence, by which I mean, it’s an attempt to give form, to realize the form of the contributions of my correspondents (you) to this place. But what is this place? What is it of this place that is so different from any other place? Obviously, there’s no point in duplicating what already exists. There is nothing similar to THE MERRI CREEK, OR NERO in Australia. I am situated in Melbourne,

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<sup>15</sup> Kris Hemensley, “Explanation,” *H/EAR* 8, Spring 1985.

thousands of miles from the homes of a good half of my correspondents.

But the global village is not what i'm after, even if that condition is some of my (our) reality. What is my reality? Is this publication a kind of samizdat? What do you think? I am able to extend our International a bit further, wider with this envelope. It does glorify correspondence! I need to know what you're all thinking and doing!<sup>16</sup>

“R.S.V.P.” goes on to set out a number of questions and approaches. It is asked whether the “correspondence” side of the publication should be published separately to the other material, and various ideas for thematic issues are posited, after which concluding, “But this has all the connotations of a magazine again!” With the next issue, the large format envelope had become a bound volume, and *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero* had become the mutable *H/EAR*. Themes of some issues of *H/EAR* were signalled by permutations of the title, such as “HER/e,” “tHEAtRe,” and “HEARt.”

*The Merri Creek* and *H/EAR* represent what happened *after* the 1960s and early to mid-1970s, and the explosion of new kinds of poetry and publications within that period. In a different context, the poet John Tranter had referred to the poetry published in his anthology *The New Australian Poetry* (1979) as representing “serious attempts” as opposed to the “beginners’ exercises” of the late 1960s and earlier 1970s.<sup>17</sup> While the usefulness of the binary for any determinant of value is questionable, considered as an indicator of a broad direction or

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<sup>16</sup> Kris Hemensley, “R.S.V.P.” *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero* 3, February/May 1980.

<sup>17</sup> John Tranter, “Introduction,” *The New Australian Poetry*, edited by John Tranter, St. Lucia: Makar Press, 1979, p. xxvi.

tendency, it allows one to see *Merri Creek-H/EAR* as representing a self-critical period of “working out,” one which would contrast with the immediacy and youthfulness (for the generation that included Tranter and Hemensley) of the 1960s. What comes to the fore in *Merri Creek*, and what is continued in *H/EAR*, is an interest in networks of literary formations themselves, as much as in literary products, presented, as the shopwindow metaphor suggests, like wares in a store—the derivation of magazine being of course *magasin*, i.e. warehouse, store. Jumping off the pages of the project/correspondence is Hemensley’s enthusiasm for dialogue and exchange, for crossreferencing literary interests and names, for describing connections and influences between people and ideas. Likewise, the dedicated focus on internationalism via a broadened idea of the local, the two being understood not as exclusive but as necessary counterparts. From *H/EAR* 6, in 1984:

Overseas contributions to this “project-correspondence” are increasing. And it isn’t a tax on the Melbourne vitality (from which *H/EAR* emerged three years ago) on the contrary, the local is affirmed by the world paying a call! and “the world”: is & was always (t)here! Amplifying the local by referring to overseas mutualities. This is the opposite of the conventional local practice of importing foreigners (happy to receive their foreign bounty) with one hand, & denying the local foreignness with the other.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of a “pure” poetry, floating above the connections of literary networks, has very much been done away with; we have moved from poetry “per se” to poetry as part of the mix, part of (contingent on) discourse and correspondence.

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<sup>18</sup> Kris Hemensley, “dear Reader,” *H/EAR* 6, Winter 1984, pp. 1-2.

The migrating titles and cumulative cataloguing system of Hemensley’s magazine series deserve a mention.<sup>19</sup> These can sometimes seem designed to confuse librarians, and this is in fact the subject of a piece of correspondence from Margaret O’Hagan of the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland, which opens *H/EAR* 4. Hemensley writes that he is “grateful to her for this opportunity to set the record straight!” and proceeds to do so, outlining the nature of his ongoing series of magazines, its changing titles, and its numbering system. When understood as a *series* rather than as autonomous single titles, Hemensley’s project can be understood as a way of building the possibility of change into the overall structure. It is perhaps too simple to need saying, but nonetheless, the change from *The Ear* to *Merri Creek*, and from *Merri Creek* to *H/EAR*, were both breaks within and continuations of—ways of continuing—the overall series, which begins with *Earth Ship* in 1970, and is continued with the digital instalments of poems, diary entries, letters, and other miscellany which have appeared irregularly on Hemensley’s blog, [collectedworks-poetryideas.blogspot.com](http://collectedworks-poetryideas.blogspot.com), since 2007. It is, also, not hard to see Hemensley’s role as a bookseller at Collected Works Bookshop as a continuation of the aims of open-ended conversation and correspondence that were so much part of the spirit of *Merri Creek* and *H/EAR*.<sup>20</sup> Hemensley’s magazine series, as a whole, can perhaps be understood as allied with the turn, within the various modernist and new poetry traditions, towards the serial or long poem. His

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<sup>19</sup> To illustrate, in *H/EAR* 8 (1985)—its final issue—details are listed as: “*H/EAR* No. 8, *Earth Ship* 3rd Series, *Earth Ship* No. 44, *The Merri Creek*, *Or, Nero* 11.”

<sup>20</sup> Collected Works Bookshop opened in 1987 and has resided in several different places in Melbourne since then. Originally organised by a collective, it has been run by Kris and Retta Hemensley for many years, from its central Melbourne location. It was due to close at the end of 2018.

particular approach is recuperative or overlapping, with elements of past publications, events or correspondence folded back in to the magazine as it progresses: its history is open, the movement of the series better understood as concentric or trochaic, than as linear or lock-step iambic.<sup>21</sup> The best example of this historical approach is the “Documenta” series that appeared in four of the eight issues of *H/EAR*. This consisted of selections from Hemensley’s journals from the late 1960s and early 1970s, threaded through separate issues, such that the reader could follow along chronologically with aspects of Hemensley’s early years in the Melbourne poetry scene, particularly the activity centered around the La Mama poetry readings fifteen years earlier. Its purpose was overt: “to establish the inter-disciplinary nature, the inter-medial poetics as it were, of that very particular activity at La Mama that might simply be called ‘La Mama.’” “Documenta” was said to be “involved in the tracking of a Melbourne poetics, an inter-medial body or references, that develops thru to this day & doubtless beyond.”<sup>22</sup> The correspondence from O’Hagan regarding the numbering of the series highlights again the active-archive mission statement of *Merri Creek-H/EAR*. These were not assembled for a distant, future repository (such as The Fryer Library), or not primarily, but rather for the present in which they were written, the underlying contention being that there need not be a time-lag between writing/literature and the writing *about* it. Of course, the publications do now reside in the time vault of “the archive.” However, by using the metaphor of the archive for his project,

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<sup>21</sup> This term is borrowed from Bonny Cassidy’s elaboration of the concept in Jennifer Maiden’s poetry. See “*The Lives of Others: Tactics of Encounter and Wandering in Jennifer Maiden’s Poetry*,” *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, May 2011, pp. 51-68.

<sup>22</sup> Kris Hemensley, “dear Reader,” *H/EAR* 3, August 1982.

Hemensley sought to bring to bear on contemporary writing the kinds of careful attention and thinking devoted to “archival material.”

Throughout *Merri Creek* and *H/EAR* are the “letters received,” occasionally with Hemensley’s responses but mostly without. Passive consumption was discouraged: “Correspondence & exchange is definitely invited! It is expected! If we don’t hear from you, how can you be a correspondent? A friend, yes, you’ll still be a friend, but that’s another matter.”<sup>23</sup> Reading these letters, it is clear that Hemensley’s enthusiasm was contagious to many of those around him. It appears likely that correspondents, aware that their letters would be typed up and become part of the next issue, began to take their letter writing more seriously, thereby raising the stakes for what correspondence was or could be. A model of reading-writing correspondence, of “working off each other,” was being proposed, and a growing literary network described, with each successive issue. Poems, art criticism, visual material, reviews, and occasionally fiction appear, but these have the sense of being alongside the correspondence. The conventional form whereby letters to the editor are prefatory and peripheral is inverted. In *Merri Creek*, and in *H/EAR* even more so, the letters seem at least the equal of the poetry, if not to lead or steer the issue. In doing so, the form of the magazine itself was able to exhort that “our” actually existing talking and writing to each other was to be considered important. Hemensley explains:

“H-slash-E-A-R”: I mean this sense of H/EAR, it was about “hear us now,” and “us here now.” So, there was that equation. And I also used the word...an active archive. I mean it was like the tortoise, the history: you carry the history with you. And it is

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<sup>23</sup> “R.S.V.P.” *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero* 3, February/May 1980.

this thing of, this synchronicity, this simultaneity, this...knowing what has been but feeling that the trajectories of that history are as vivid and as active and as energetic if you intersect with them. That was my kind of...my metaphysics, if you like. That's what I think the world is, or "us" is. I do think that. I think: nothing ever finished yet, it's all going along, everything's going along, from the year dot. And we can intersect with those energies. And through something as simple and as common or garden\* as a kind of reminiscence—you know Robert Duncan saying there's a difference between gossip and essential gossip. But he felt that a lot of the literary history that he was interested in, involved in, was *essential gossip*. And I believe the same thing. That these are important...I did think that if you wanted to have a local literature, a local poetry, you had to work off each other.<sup>24</sup>

To read through Hemensley's magazine series, from the *Our Glass* newsletters onwards, is to see the beginnings of a highly energetic project to bring into existence a literary culture that would value the various kinds of new Australian poetry (as shopworn as that particular phrase has become), and which then develops, via the new UK and U.S. poets published in *Earth Ship*, the subsequent bringing of this network back to Melbourne with *The Ear*, and on into the sophisticated internationalist discussions of poetics, aesthetics, and politics that constitute much of *Merri Creek* and particularly *H/EAR*. *H/EAR*, thus, had big aims: to continue the renovation of a literary culture—the one understood to begin with the new little mags and readings in the late 1960s—while avoiding all that which was found to be moribund or stifling (nationalism, careerism, parochialism). It pursued its aims through very practical, material methods. Through its letter-documents, each issue of *H/EAR* became a snapshot, an active archive, of a

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<sup>24</sup> Kris Hemensley, author interview with Kris and Retta Hemensley at Collected Works Bookshop, July 22, 2017. \*i.e., garden variety.

cross section of the particular group or network that it comprised. Correspondents often responded to and thereby extended the work of the previous issues. One notable example of this is the exchange between Hemensley and Ken Bolton in *H/EAR* 6, concerning part of a long poem by John Anderson that had been published in the previous issue. Bolton's first letter responds to the work in positive terms, however a second letter, sent a few days later, reconsiders, taking a more critical view, citing initially Anderson's use of animistic terms and reliance on a sense of bardic authority: "truths, revelations, are announced with the unqualifying simplicity of myth."<sup>25</sup> Hemensley's response is a piece titled "A Small Platter of Objections, for Ken Bolton." The positions of each correspondent are complex, self-questioning, difficult to summarise, both at times written from high points of intellectual abstraction (with references to Olson, Ponge, Barthes, Prynne, Jung, Clark Coolidge, etc.); the three letters stand as exemplary of nonreductive exchange—as well as being one of the most engaged, and still relevant, discourses on Anderson's poetry.

One of the most striking visual aspects of *H/EAR* is its dense pages of mimeographed text; see Paul Green's 17-page piece "Delphi" (*H/EAR* 7) for one example, not only of dense, paragraphless prose, but of impressive retyping by Hemensley. Even from a cursory read, the density of some of the prose in *H/EAR* makes it clear that something is going on in its pages: serious questions being asked, enthusiasms and disagreements being explored and worked out. Unlike some of the other poetry little mags of the period—and this, by now, will not surprise the reader—*H/EAR* did not mimic the conventions of an establishment literary journal: there was often no table of

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<sup>25</sup> Ken Bolton, "Regarding John Anderson's Writing," *H/EAR* 6, April 2, 1984, p. 8.

contents, and no price or subscription details provided. Usually there was not even a title on the cover page; instead: colourful wraparound sheets with geometric designs. The appeal was partly in this rejection of a more conventional little mag or establishment literary journal approach, wherein contributions are neatly arranged and safely partitioned by genre. A sense of Kris and Retta Hemensley's process in assembling issues of *H/EAR* remains evident in the final products: one can picture the correspondence sorted into piles or dossiers by correspondent, which Kris would move through typing up onto wax stencils, as Retta re-inked and operated the hand-cranked (later automatic) mimeograph press to produce the pages. The devotion apparent to the reader in the work of typing up letters received (as noted by Ned Johnson in *H/EAR* 6, "I have been reading HEART and marvelling at your labouring fingers. You have to be serious about utterances to type & print every word") seemed to help in further raising the stakes, decreeing the importance of correspondence as a (the?) central component of a literary culture—which would include here the political—rather than being simply prior or adjacent to it. At this point, it is perhaps worth distinguishing *Merri Creek-H/EAR* from related but more collectivist projects, such as *A Package Deal: Assembly Book* (1974). For the latter, each contributor, in addition to writing or drawing the content of their allotted single page, also printed the requisite copies, resulting in a diverse, heterogeneous appearance.<sup>26</sup> The project of *Merri CreekH/EAR* was highly open and richly networked, but at the

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<sup>26</sup> *A Package Deal: Assembly Book*. Various contributors, organised on a collectivist model, coordinated by Pam Brown, Nigel Roberts, Tim Burns, and Di Morrissey, Sydney: Art Worker's Collective, 1974. <sup>28</sup> Kris Hemensley, "dear Reader," *H/EAR* 3, August 1982.

same time filtered through the same Hemensley typewriter and mimeograph press, giving it a distinctive and uniform style.

One theme in particular comes through strongly in *H/EAR*, and it is in many ways *the* issue of the early eighties period: the looming threat of nuclear annihilation, shorthanded as “the Bomb.” It is evident in the urgency and sense of fragility in some of the salutations to the letters, it is there in a parenthetical addition that follows a reference to the future in one issue’s introductory note: “(as long as there is a beyond, a future, ahead of us).”<sup>28</sup> Sometimes it is more closely connected to the practice of writing: Hemensley, writing about a proposed forum on the work of Gary Snyder, when the latter visited Australia in 1981 on the occasion of the Montsalvat Poetry Festival and a related People for Nuclear Disarmament event: “Simply, as John Anderson, a poet who might have had a deal to contribute at the Snyder forum, subsequently said, the Bomb is present in our writing, whether we mention it or not, for now we write in its clarity.”<sup>27</sup> Anderson’s point is a seductive one, and invites reformulation for today’s terrain, and thereby, questions: are they—Australia’s settler colonialism, policies of torture towards asylum seekers—present whether we mention them or not? Do these factors, such as climate change and the renewed threat of the Bomb, generate a kind of clarity in which we write? It is in the same extended report on and critique of the Montsalvat Poetry Festival that some of the frustration with Australian literary politics that eventually led to the decision to begin the project/correspondence comes through; the cancellation of the Snyder forum is for Hemensley “a proper illustration of the one-dimensionality of local literature, the failure to realise the

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<sup>27</sup> “Festivals of the Oppressed: An Account of the 1981 Montsalvat Poetry Festival, & the foundation meeting of People for Nuclear Disarmament [sic] (both October, 1981),” *H/EAR* 4, Winter 1983, p. 275.

interdisciplinism that poetry augurs, obligatory elsewhere.”<sup>28</sup> Putting aside whether this really was or is obligatory elsewhere, it gives an idea of the ultimately generative frustration that both led to the rejection of a conventional poetry little mag format, and gave birth to the project/correspondence.

The project/correspondence was both synchronic and diachronic. Hemensley wanted to render public what was happening in the more private exchange of literary/political correspondence; indeed, he aimed to document and distribute it, to archive it for contemporary use. There is a Beat-like ebullience—reminiscent of *On the Road*'s narrator “desirous of everything at the same time,” and characteristic also of the autodidact—in Hemensley's desire to tap into other minds and their various enthusiasms (“I need to know what you're all thinking and doing!”). However, the project was also historical and recuperative, as exemplified by the “Documenta” series, and—in later issues of *H/EAR*—the reprinting of early pieces from *Earth Ship*. Hemensley's inclusive idea of what could constitute a “Melbourne poetics” (and by extension any iteration of the local) clearly broadened the idea of what was possible at the time—cantilevering open a space for the discussion of poetics and politics. The three issues of *The Merri Creek, Or, Nero* and the eight issues of *H/EAR* provide a model of thinking about poetry that is rigorously open-ended, discursive, questioning, interested in all of the arts, and one which consistently looks beyond national boundaries. Implicit in the structure of the series is a desire to fend off the moribund and stagnant: seen in the shifting forms and names the magazine takes (all within the one ongoing serial), and the evident desire to escape or sidestep a conventional *magasin* form of magazine. In their resolute openness in form and discourse they

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 274.

demonstrate a material elaboration of the belief “nothing ever finished.”

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*The Merri Creek, Or, Nero* 1, 2, & 3 each consist of loose unnumbered pages of printed matter contained in an envelope; from No. 4 onwards the issues are bound, page-numbered, and the title becomes *H/EAR. Merri Creek* published three issues between 1977, 1979, and 1980, and *H/EAR* followed directly from this, publishing eight issues between 1981 and 1985.

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