The river meanders still:
Curation as research-creation for an unknowable exhibition

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ABSTRACT

The river meanders still: Curation as research-creation for an unknowable exhibition

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The canalized southernmost section of Wonscotonach (the Don River) in Tkarón:to (Toronto), also known as *The Narrows*, is a highly disturbed urban natural landscape. Following the 1886 Don Improvement Project, the Keating Channel, and today the Port Lands Revitalization and Flood Protection Project, these Lands have been harnessed and developed through settler colonization to tame and control the once-winding river. This research-creation—in the form of a curated online exhibition and written thesis—presents a critical (re)reading of the notion of improvement, becoming allied to the pre-colonial landscape and the knowledge it carried.

This exhibition and thesis develop the concept of the meander, inspired by the non-linear trajectory of the pre-canalized Don River, as a model for the curatorial. The curatorial process of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* began before the global COVID-19 pandemic and, subsequently, was derailed in March 2020. The exhibition's final form was unknowable throughout much of the curatorial process. Thus, following the meander as a research-creation technique, the curatorial process, exhibitionary structure, and content had to adapt through lingering uncertainty. This thesis, contributing to the theoretical and practical knowledge of research-creation, looks to intersections with the curatorial following the theoretical underpinnings of Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, Natalie Loveless and Stefanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman. As a project untethered from institutional timelines and normative requirements to 'know a project in advance,' as well as the conventions of a physical exhibition, this research-creation manifested through process-led, creative and exploratory techniques (such as walking and drawing) and slowed pace allowed by the COVID-19 pandemic's reframing of time. This research-creation exhibition and written thesis develop a responsive and resilient curatorial process deeply indebted to Land-based knowledge.

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Dedicated to my grandmother, Ruth Pullen, my inspiration.

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Preamble

I have always loved the Land where I live, work and create. I have learned so much from these Lands.

As a white settler-Canadian of mixed Irish and British ancestry, I know there is so much that I do not know and so much that I must unlearn about the Land on which I live as an uninvited guest. These are Indigenous Lands. My ancestors travelled to these Lands as intruders to find and take opportunities that were not rightfully given.

To acknowledge the Land, we must attend to the historical and ongoing intersections of settler impacts on Indigenous languages, cultures, histories, economies, ecologies, well-being and governance structures. I am constantly unlearning and working to find the history hidden from me as a child educated in the colonial school system of Canada.

This research-creation dissertation came into being in Tkarón:to/Toronto on Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit and the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, the Wendat, and the Haudenosaunee who are the original custodians of this Land, and, in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal on unceded Indigenous lands where the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters. These Lands provide an abundance of gifts, for which I am eternally grateful.

Tkarón:to is within the Lands protected by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant. The Wampum is an agreement between the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. The dish is shared by all, and the single spoon signifies that everyone is expected to limit what they take for continued abundance. We must take at most our share and continuously protect and give back to the Land. Feel gratitude for the place on which you stand.

This research-creation comprises two elements: an online exhibition entitled *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* and a written thesis. The exhibition and written thesis are woven harmoniously, playing off and informing one another. The following chapters will offer a fuller context for appreciating the exhibition; conversely, the exhibition will ground the theoretical underpinnings of the writing.

While the encounter between writing and exhibition can be experienced in any manner, I suggest the following approach: begin by reading this thesis until the end of Chapter 3,

Meander: A slow journey through the COVID-19 pandemic, then view the exhibition—on location at the Lower Don Valley using your mobile phone and a set of headphones, or anywhere using a mobile phone or desktop computer and headphones—then continue reading the final Chapter 4, *Mouth: At the exhibition's edge,* and Conclusion, *An end, a continuation*. Just as thinking and making are co-constituted in the research-creation process, their expressions co-compose and complement one another.

The exhibition can be viewed at the following Url: https://therivermeandersstill.ca.

Password: DonRiver2022

Introduction
Tracing a line

> What would it mean to trace a line by listening, instead? Kinesthetic sympathy is what we feel when we watch a dancer, a body winding through space. Our own muscles flex and release while watching. As water curves and impacts and pours—can we too?
> —Danica Evering, *Songs for The Narrows*

Matching the ebbs and flows of a meandering river with the movement of our bodies, tracing the lines of time by the layers of silt and earth exposed during drought or altered by flood, we come to learn from the Land. This kind of embodied knowledge is cultivated, over time, together or apart by an extended relationship to a place. I feel this type of 'kinesthetic sympathy' in my over 20-year relationship with Wonscotonach (the Don River) in Tkarón:to. The river, which has a complicated and complex history of pre-colonial flows, development, disciplining, pollution and rehabilitation, is one of many urban waterways that have sustained a city's growth and development. However, Wonscotonach (the Don River) is unique for its small size and the significant failure of its colonial 'improvements' in the name of progress and prosperity. This research-creation dissertation is a curated online exhibition—a 'walk' composed of three artworks along the canalized lower section of the Don River, which can also be experienced off-site. It is inspired by Wonscotonach's pre-straightened meandering flows, following the 'curves and impacts and pours' of Tkarón:to's developing waterway to (re)consider its historical and contemporary role in the city.

Taking up a critical (re)reading of colonial notions of 'improvement,' my artist collaborators Danica Evering, Elijah Harper, and Shelby Lisk revisit the connection between Wonscotonach (the Don River) and the city of Tkarón:to. In the late 1880s, through the Don Improvement Project, the lower river was straightened and canalized to control nature's rhythmic course and harness the waterway's utility. The winding and wild meander was straightened and widened, expressing a colonial desire to tame, discipline, control and use the Land; *the meander* became *The Narrows*[1] (fig. 1). The online sound and video-based exhibition *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* speaks to relations with water as they emerge and shift through urban development.

Two sound works were produced for this exhibition in the context of a multi-year collaborative effort between myself, Danica Evering and Elijah Harper, while the third

[1] The canalized section of the Lower Don is also known as The Narrows.

Figure 1

Aerial view of the Don River from Bloor Street to Queen Street, 1948. Image courtesy of the Toronto Public Library.

video work, an existing piece by Shelby Lisk, was selected as an endpoint that speaks to the current state, and possible futures, of The Narrows. Working with sound, which is often a secondary mode of engaging with place, Evering and Harper stage embodied encounters with The Narrows of Wonscotonach, speaking uniquely and from their own voices to the site's complicated colonial history, while Lisk's video diptych suggests the importance of water's memory and the possible futures of the river. Tending to the overflows that spill out from the cracks of The Narrows' linear trajectory, the three artworks gesture towards the fringes. The exhibition, *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*, activates the latent presence of Wonscotonach's meander so that we may learn from the highly altered landscape of The Narrows.

This dissertation was formed in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic and was able to manifest through the process-led, creative and exploratory techniques of research-creation. With the explosion of the boundaries between the institution and the home—as life and work moved online—and the dangers and limitations of field-work, experiential research-creation techniques, such as walking, kept this exhibition alive and in formation albeit at a slowed pace. In the end, offering the potential to carve out new possibilities for outside forces to seep in and enrich the work itself. According to Erin Manning, the term research-creation is allied to Black studies scholars Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's term "study,"[2] as a practice of workshopping, rehearsing, jamming, walking, and playing that expresses a "kind of common intellectual practice."[3] Such a practice is not bound to producing a finished product—paper, exhibition, object—but instead values the process of creative thought. Without the horizon of an 'end-date' and the uncertainty of what would be possible under the ever-shifting restrictions imposed to stop the spread of COVID-19, this research-creation exhibition's final form was unknowable throughout much of the curatorial process. Becoming untethered from the structure of a finished product (exhibition) in mind, this dissertation's weathering of the COVID-19 pandemic created the conditions for a fuller expression of research-creation's potentials.[4]

The exhibition, *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*, suggests a counter-narrative to the proposed 'improvement' of Wonscotonach through the straightening and channelization of the 1886 Improvement Project (fig. 2). Straightening as a metaphor for taming, the normative, the colonial. The exhibition questions the early and continued role of spatial and place-based practices in the project of settler colonialism—specifically

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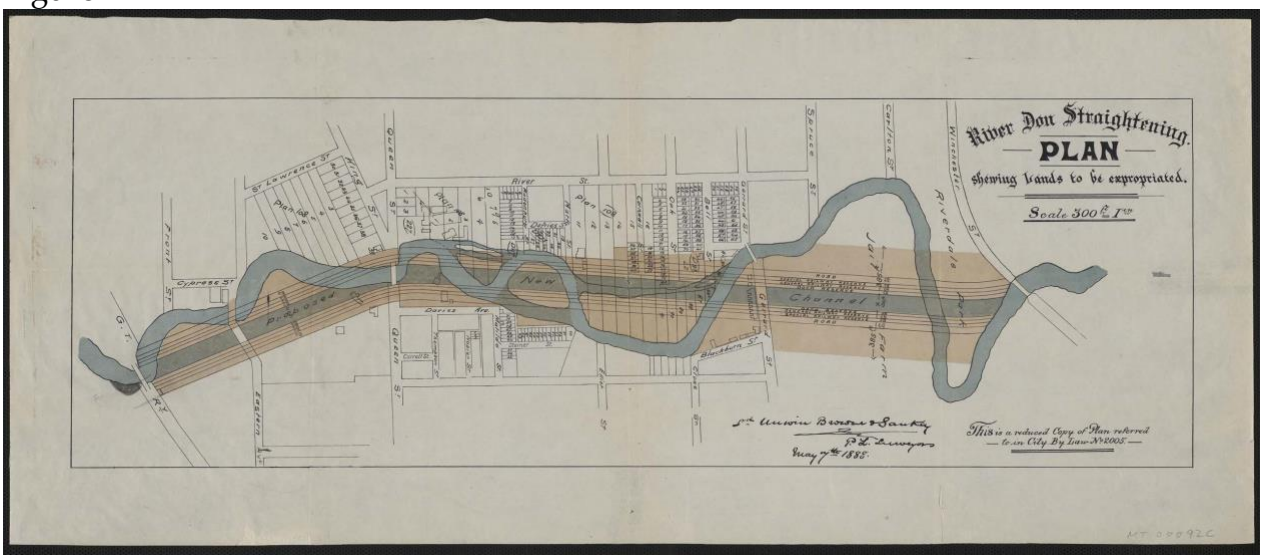
[2] Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
[3] Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (London: Minor Compositions, 2013), 110.
[4] Research-creation as allied to Moten and Harney's concept of 'study.'

a critical re-reading of the concept of 'improvement' in relation to the colonial development of Land—and the "intergenerational injustices entailed in loss of place and species and the increasing possibility of human extinction due to climate change."[5] Here, an attunement to the specificities of place creates the conditions for 'other' histories, narratives and modes of engaging with the Land to emerge. In the face of climate devastation—and, in 2020, a global pandemic—the local scale presents an opportunity for meaningful decolonial work to take hold.

Figure 2



Unwin, Browne and Sankey, Surveyors, "River Don Straightening Plan," showing lands to be expropriated, May 7, 1888, City of Toronto Archives, Series 725, File 12.

My three artist collaborators are old and new friends who have been organically folded into this exhibition project at various stages. Their artworks are grounded in their experiences with the Don River (Wonscotonach) both before our collaborative work and through the knowledge we have developed together during many walks along the Lower Don River. Their respective works present unsettled modes of listening and attuning to the specificities of the river: a soundwalk grounded in field recordings, conjuring kinesthetic sympathy through five movements (Evering); a soundscape developed through original composition and sampling that speaks to the artist's Queer Black identity and affinities with the straightened river (Harper); a video diptych that tends to water's memory and capacity to find its way back (Lisk).

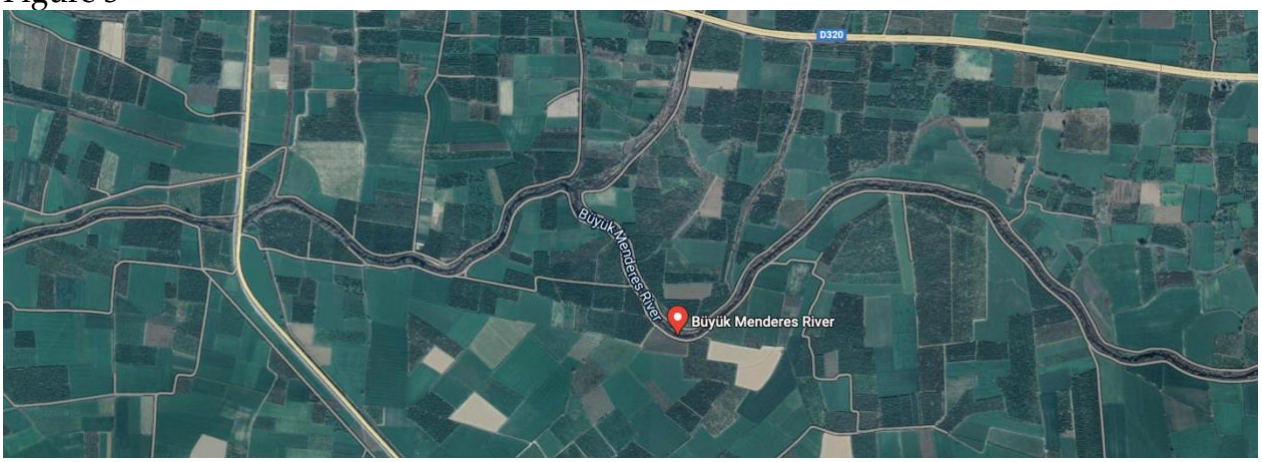
Departing from a more traditional 'didactic statement,' the exhibition's 'curatorial texts' are framed as three 'acts' corresponding to each of the artists' works that include: a short

[5] Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

description of where to locate yourself if you are experiencing the works on location; a circular-cropped black and white map of that location marked with an orange dot indicating the place to begin the following work; a framing paragraph describing the thematic starting point for each of the three movements; and an archival image, chosen to contextualize each of the works. The web-based exhibition is accessible on desktop or mobile, so the works can be heard and watched on and off-site. Ideally, audiences will have the opportunity to experience the exhibition in situ at the Lower Don River, following the guiding prompts which structure the experience as a 'walk' with moments of movement and stationary contemplation. However, the exhibition's website was developed knowing that anyone can access the work from anywhere and thus is translatable across multiple and unknowable forms of engagement.

The particular form of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* as a single-scrolling-page exhibition in three acts reflects the methodological journey of its curation. The exhibition unfolded as a *meander*, drawing inspiration from the river's flow and a framing of 'curation as research-creation.'[6] The Büyük Menderes River in southwestern Turkey (historically the Maeander or Meander) gave us the word; *meander*. The winding flow of the Maeander came to describe such river patterns (fig. 3). The word is from Ancient Greek and also names the river's patron deity, Meander, one of the sons of Oceanus and Tethys. Drawing inspiration from the Don River (Wonscotonach), the path of this research-creation saw many ebbs and flows, took turns, experienced drought and flood, and in the end, this work would not have been possible without embracing the meander of the river as a model for the research-creation curatorial process.

Figure 3



Büyük Menderes River, Screenshot of Google Maps, October 15, 2022.

[6] The concept of curation as research-creation presented in this dissertation is indebted to my ongoing collaborative work with the Curatorial Research-Creation Collective (myself, Matthew-Robin Nye, karen wong).

The four chapters of this dissertation will follow the form of this research-creation's unfolding. Guided by the lingering presence of the Don River's formerly meandering flows (today *The Narrows*), the written component will move chronologically through four phases of the project, reflecting the major shifts that occurred during the moments before, at the height of, and in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Following the ever-shifting and temporally specific conditions of this work the urgency and intensity of the curatorial process is translated in writing through moments of diaristic reflection and field notes which are woven through varying epistemological frames, histories, and concepts. The written component undulates between the necessary components of a thesis—methods, exhibition and literature reviews—and personal reflections on significant moments in time where the project was disrupted, changed or became clearer. The manner in which the following chapters unfold is an expression of the concept of the meander as a research-creation curatorial technique.

Chapter 1, *Source: Gathering histories*, situates my position as a curator and researcher and traces a history of the Lower Don River and Valley. Beginning with my childhood connection to the Don, I describe my shifting experience as I come to retune to its flows. Initially inspired by the urban-natural valley as a space of magic and wonderment through my childhood visions, I revisit the site as an "unsettled settler." [7] Braiding together Indigenous and settler scholarship on the concept of 'unsettling,' I critically reconsider my relationship to the Land and the power relations steeped by childhood encounters with and access to the Don River. This line of thinking flows together with a re-reading of the settler-Canadian notion of 'improvement' as it relates, in general, to a colonial desire to control, tame and employ the Land and specifically to the 1886 Don Improvement Plan. An expansion of the concept of the meander as a research-creation curatorial technique weaves together the beginning of this research-creation's formation starting in 2018 with site visits and historical research. A critical re-storying of the Don River post-settlement is recounted through the writings of historian Jennifer Bonnell. Chapter 1 culminates in a brief account of the canalized Don River as a site of artistic and activist intervention; winding through time—from my childhood to present relation with the river and between pre- and post-colonial histories—setting up a storied history that would come to form this research-creation.

Chapter 2, *Tributaries: A confluence of theory, methods, exhibitions and literature*, sets up the project's early coming into being through preliminary research, site visits and proposals weaving together concepts, theory, methods and continuing the literature and exhibition reviews. This chapter is the longest of this thesis as it serves to ground the

[7] Erich Steinman, "Unsettling as agency: Unsettling settler colonialism where you are," *Settler Colonial Studies* 10 (2020): 558-575.

later reflections on the curatorial process and the final exhibition. Beginning with a conceptualization of place, located within the frame of *critical place theory*, this chapter suggests the importance of starting with and centring place for decolonial research. Details of the research-creation process punctuate the chapter throughout, providing the necessary context for the exhibition's formation through the introduction of my artist collaborator Danica and descriptions of adjacent projects that came to influence this work. Histories and theories of walking as a creative practice and, in particular, as a research-creation practice ground this project's Land-based methods. The creative walking practices that inspired this research-creation—those of Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman, Lisa Myers and Amish Morrell and Diane Borsato—are explored. Chapter 2 continues with a constellation of thought around 'the curatorial'—foregrounding the practice of Emelie Chhangur—followed by an expansion of the exhibition as the materialization of a processual curatorial approach. The chapter ends during the first weeks of March 2020, as the immanent derailment of this research-creation begins to unfold in the early context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3, *Meander: A slow journey through the COVID-19 pandemic*, begins from within the (new) context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, following the meandering research-creation curatorial process of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* through its formation. A narration of various site visits with my collaborators is woven throughout, outlining the emergence of the exhibition's contours and impactful experiences on site. Chapter 3 is the most diaristic, capturing the urgency and ever-shifting nature of this research-creation during the early days—and continued months and years—of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, this chapter folds in research-creation theories of Indigenous sound studies (Dylan Robison) and follows 'curiosity,' (Natalie Loveless), guiding the reader through the research-creation exhibition's curatorial process.

Chapter 4, *Mouth: At the exhibition's edge*, reflects on the exhibition and my collaborators' three artistic contributions. I describe my curatorial process, web design, and aesthetic choices, reflecting upon the affordance of the born-digital exhibition 'walk'. Followed by an analysis of each of the three artistic contributions of my collaborators, Danica Evering, Elijah Harper and Shelby Lisk. Danica's 5-movement soundwalk guides listeners down the length of The Narrows, following musical composition techniques—like the descant and canon—and working with field recordings. She narrates *Songs for the Narrows*, describing the tensions between urban development and the remains of the natural landscape. Following this attentive attunement to place Elijah's soundscape, *A harmony with the straight and narrow*, tells of his relation to the river, seeing his own experience growing up queer reflected in the treatment of the Don River through its taming and *straightening* via the 1886 Don Improvement Plan. Finally, Shelby Lisk's

video diptych *All that will remain* attends to water's memory, urging a hopeful narrative of the river's ability to continue and reclaim the path it was denied through its canalization, even if this will take more time than we can imagine. Together, the experience of these three works erodes a colonial valorization of 'improvement,' asking audiences to consider their relationship to the Land.

I encourage the reader to consider their situatedness, and mine, in time. Following the meander as a model for the curatorial, *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* develops research-creation's "speculative and event oriented" techniques.[8] Following this research-creation's phases in time is necessary to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020 and the field of relations from which each curatorial decision was made. Further, as a project formed during the pandemic, this dissertation was made possible through research-creation's process-led approach to making and thinking.[9]

While following a linear chronology may appear inconsistent with research-creation's orientation to the speculative middle, the timeline—which weaves in and out of focus throughout the written component—illustrates the urgency and impacts of the pandemic. A linear ordering, in time, acts as a trajectory from which curves, bends, and departures are made. Here, the timeline conjures latent processes that guided this research-creation, such as fated encounters which are often omitted from the institutional research process. Divergences—field notes, affective writing, drawings and photographs—punctuate the trajectory following the river's meandering path from beginning to end.

Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman suggest that research-creation emerges from the *middle*. It is necessarily "situated and responsive," materializing from within an existing field of relations already on its way.[10] Springgay and Truman assert that "the speculative middle shifts methods from a reporting on the world to a way of being in the world that is open to experimentation and is (in) tension."[11] Writing through my experience as a curator over the last five years, I have woven in references, reflections and descriptions of the things forming and informing the 'field of relations' from which this exhibition emerged. Springgay and Truman, referencing Celia Lury's concept of "live methods," suggest that research thought of as profoundly situated, or as "an event

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[8] Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman, *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World: WalkingLab* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 14.
[9] Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 83.
[10] Springgay and Truman, 87.
[11] Ibid.

of becoming," emphasizes "doing rather than meaning-making."[12] This orientation to methods is embedded in the potentiality of the present rather than following institutional(izing), colonial, and anthropocentric models of representing an objective reality and treating data as some existing phenomena.

[12] Ibid.

Chapter 1: 'Source'
Gathering Histories

I have always felt a pull toward the Don River. I remember being six or seven years old and taking the TTC (Toronto Transit Commission) subway west, along the Bloor-Danforth green line from Greenwood station to somewhere Downtown. When the subway train pulled out of Broadview station, I would jump out of my seat and head to the nearest window. Daylight would quickly envelop the train as it passed across the Prince Edward Viaduct below the cars, bikes and pedestrian traffic crossing the top of the bridge.

The Prince Edward Viaduct, which opened in 1918, accommodates the rail traffic of two TTC subway trains (one travelling east and one travelling west) that didn't begin traversing the bridge until the TTC's Bloor-Danforth line opened in 1966. The Viaduct's designer Edmund W. Burke and then commissioner of public works R.C. Harris advocated for the inclusion of the lower rail transport deck in the early 20th century, which was controversial due to its high cost and lack of immediate use. In 1918 the Viaduct was the only bridge crossing the expansive Don Valley and River north of Gerrard Street.[13] It became an essential connection between Toronto's East and West side communities and was necessary for developing the city's East End. Burke and Harris's controversial lower rail deck saved the City of Toronto millions of dollars when the TTC began development in the 1960s, using the Viaduct to connect Danforth Avenue and Bloor Street, forming the Bloor-Danforth 'green line.'

This story of infrastructural development and taming the wild river valley to facilitate urbanization is just one in a complex history of colonial expansion in which rivers, here the Don, have been "uniquely cast as facilitators of human labour and, as such, as bearers of possibilities."[14] Cities rely on rivers, just as Montreal is connected to the St. Lawrence; Calgary to the Bow; New Orleans's tragic relation to the Mississippi; London, England, to the River Thames; and Paris, France, to La Seine. However, the Don River, as Toronto's industrial artery, is unique for its small size (compared to the urban waterways mentioned) and relative lack of power-generating potential. Historically, in relation to Toronto's development, the Don has been used primarily as a sink for waste and a site for industry. Canadian and environmental historian Jennifer Bonnell illustrates this history of the Don River and Valley, quoting an 1884 issue of *Toronto*

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[13] Jennifer Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don: An Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), xxiv.
[14] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, xxii.

World; "every city that has manufacturing industries has a district set apart, therefore, and the Don is the district that nature and expedience have set apart for Toronto."[15] Indeed, the Humber River, more than double the length of the Don and draining a watershed almost three times the size, would seem a more logical choice for a city's central waterway. Before European settlement, the Humber River was a significant artery of trade, travel and sustenance for many Indigenous nations. Fortunately, the colonial gaze passed over the Humber River, preserving the waterway and its connection to the ancient Carrying Place Trail. The Wendat (Huron), Onondawahgah (Seneca) and later the Mississauga First Nations used the Carrying Place Trail as a trade network leading from the Saint Lawrence Valley into the Upper Great Lakes and Canadian Northwest. For much of human history, the Humber River and Carrying Place Trail was the preferred corridor for establishing agricultural villages and moving goods and people between Lake Ontario and Lake Simcoe.[16] However, early settlers of Tkarón:to found an ill-fated promise in the smaller Don River.

Passing across the massive infrastructure of the Viaduct's lower deck, I would peer down from the subway train windows to catch a glimpse of the lush green expanse of the river valley in summer; a cacophony of rich red and orange in the fall; sheets of ice moving down the river in winter; and budding life in the spring. I loved following the river's winding shape in the otherwise overly logical grid of Toronto's infrastructure. Something about the massive green corridor slicing through the heart of Toronto's urban landscape of concrete streets and skyscrapers captivated my attention. My first memories of the Don River and Valley were experiences from above, passing rapidly across the Viaduct, trying to take in as much of the shape of the trees and river as I could in a few short seconds.

Since childhood, my mom would take me on adventures; she called this 'running away from home.' Running away from our small apartment in low-income housing in the 'Little India' neighbourhood of Toronto's East End—and all of our problems and stresses—to be caught up in the magic of exploring, meandering, and getting lost to find something new. My subsequent encounters with the Don River and Valley were experienced from within, during the summers, on foot or by bike. We 'got lost' in the Lower Don Valley many times, though the time I remember most had us emerge from the lush green valley at the base of the Riverdale Farm, a working farm located in Toronto's Cabbagetown neighbourhood at the top of Riverdale Park West. I was surprised to find all sorts of farm animals in Downtown Toronto, and after 'getting lost' for a couple of hours in the valley, it felt like we had momentarily fled urban life.

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[15] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 28.

[16] Bonnell, xxiii.

Beginning this curatorial project and deciding to return to the Don River and Valley in a new capacity, I felt compelled to keep learning from this place. To embody that childlike wonder of learning by getting lost while also attuning and attending to the multiple histories and geographies of the river and valley, many of which I was formerly unaware. As a white settler-Canadian of mixed Irish and British ancestry and first-generation university student, I know there is so much that I do not know and so much that I must unlearn about the Land on which I live as an uninvited guest. Returning to and learning from the Lower Don River and Valley, I have done my best to engage a multitude of diverse sources, epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies to educate myself about the history of Turtle Island, to unlearn, and to find the history that was concealed from me as a child educated in the colonial school system of Canada. I am committed to becoming/being an "unsettled settler."[17] I embody this position by critically self-reflecting on my intentions and motivations through the relationships I build and maintain; and by taking up an "unsettling agency" in everyday life.[18]

As a curator and researcher, I traverse different forms of knowing, from institutional to curatorial, somatic, and experiential. Leaving space for mistakes and challenging myself to do the work of unlearning a history of the Land on which I have been raised is an ongoing and lifelong process whose meandering flows of knowledge, love, care and pain I welcome as my responsibility. Un-leaning the history of Canada while respectfully learning about and engaging with Indigenous peoples, their territories, sovereignties and worldviews is necessary and must center Indigenous voices without necessitating additional labour or trauma. As a settler, I am responsible for educating myself and respectfully sharing that knowledge with other settlers. In this process, and as a settler curator, I am constantly working to amplify those voices at the margins without continuing a legacy of colonial extraction. This research-creation exhibition, and my curatorial process within it, is a small gesture towards sparking conversations and encouraging settler-Canadians to rethink history and our relationships to Land and, more specifically, to question notions of 'improvement' wrought by a colonial worldview.

For Leey'qsun scholar Rachel Flowers, settler is "a critical term that denaturalizes and politicizes the presence of non-Indigenous people on Indigenous Lands, but also can disrupt the comfort of non-Indigenous people by bringing ongoing colonial power relations into their consciousness."[19] Returning to and reflecting upon my own identity

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[17] Steinman, "Unsettling as agency."

[18] Canada's 2015 *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* calls on settler Canadians to recognize their responsibility to ensure that Indigenous peoples hold their equitable place in Canadian society.

[19] Rachel Flowers, "Refusal to forgive: Indigenous Women's Love and Rage," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 4, no. 2 (2015): 33.

as a settler is a move toward unsettling.[20] For Anishinaabe health and well-being scholar Tricia McGuire-Adams, identifying as a settler is not a signification of non-indigeneity; instead, it is a call to decenter whiteness, disrupt privilege, and engage in anti-racist relationships with Indigenous peoples, communities and territories.[21] 'Settler' signifies a relationship between the settler and colonialism that involves both acknowledgement and action. The settler's position is one of privilege; thus, "the labour of settlers should be to imagine alternative ways to be in relation with Indigenous peoples."[22] Flowers suggests that this may be a "process of rupture and conflict" that may be able to "generate settler political identities anew."[23] If settler colonialism is "invested in gaining certainty to lands and resources and will achieve access through dispossession of Indigenous peoples"[24] some of my work as a settler Canadian curator committed to unsettling is to center, listen to, and amplify Indigenous voices, give back to the Land through physical labour and maintenance guided by Indigenous knowledge and ceremony, and unlearn Canadian history.

Through curation as research-creation and within the slowness afforded by working through a global pandemic, I have learned so much about the Lower Don Valley and River, which once seemed so familiar to me as a child. Returning to this place with a deep sense of care and attention, I have observed the scars of colonization and industrial development and encountered a multitude of interlocutors—people, bikes, bees, cranes, a Great Egret, ducks, algae—that bring hope for the future of the Don watershed. I had been unaware of the colonial history of the Lower Don river and valley and the many interventions that have been carried out on this humble waterway to 'improve' the river. The concept of *improvement* manufactured by settler-Canadians became a catalyst for this research-creation exhibition and my thinking about colonial relations to the Land. What does it mean to 'improve' the meandering flow of the Don river? A settler-colonial mindset views improvement as a process of extraction that seeks to tame and control the Land to facilitate industry, generate power (symbolic, physical, electrical), and *employ* or make use of the natural landscape. I came to question the colonial ideal of 'improvement' in relationship to the history of the Don River when I learned of the 1886 Don Improvement. The Don Improvement Plan—inspired by the Cuyahoga River in

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[20] In their research-creation practice of walking-with, White settler scholars Springgay and Truman suggest that their focus on acknowledging Indigenous knowledge of Land is a practice of "unsettling" rather than claiming it as an act of decolonization.
[21] Tricia McGuire-Adams, "Settler allies are made, not self-proclaimed: Unsettling conversations for non-Indigenous researchers and educators involved in Indigenous health," *Health Education Journal* 80, no. 7 (2021): 763.
[22] Flowers, *Refusal to forgive*, 34.
[23] Flowers, 34.
[24] Ibid.

Cleveland, Ohio—was a project to canalize the Don, widening and straightening the river to enhance the industrial capacity of the waterway and valley, flush waste, and create a central corridor for boat and railway travel. The project experienced many hardships and, in the end, failed to achieve its proposed goals for the Don River. The Don Improvement created further problems at the river's mouth, requiring the later development of the Keating Channel.

Following the concrete walls of the channelized portion of the Lower River from the Riverdale Park Viaduct out to the Keating Channel the Improvement Project feels more like a scar than an enhancement. Rivers, seen through a colonial worldview, are often imagined as either tools or hindrances to urban development, becoming canalized or, when possible, buried. As Canadian journalist and arts writer John Bentley Mays proclaims, unlike so many streams and creeks (such as Toronto's buried Garrison Creek and Taddle Creek [also known as the Little Don River]), "the Don was just too big to bury," and thus, "one has to admire that about a river, even if it is today jailed in a grid of steel and concrete."[25]

In recent years, the mouth of the Don, altered by the Don Improvement Project, is again being reimagined to reverse the colonial scars left by 19th-century 'improvements.' The 'Port Lands Flood Protection Project' will re-naturalize the river's mouth, adding a human-made meander traversing through the formerly industrial Port Lands leading the Don out into Lake Ontario. Hindsight shows us that the meander of the Don River was essential for maintaining the watershed and preventing flood damage at the river's mouth. In the coming years, The Narrows will be buttressed by meanders on its North and South ends.

The entirety of the Don River once followed a meandering pathway from its source—today known as the Oak Ridges Moraine, which was formed 12,000 years ago by glacial movements—to its mouth opening unto the Toronto Harbor of Lake Ontario. The striking plans of the Don Improvement, overlaying a strict and punishing concrete line upon the meander, offer a visual representation of settler-colonial imposition upon nature, while the story of the Improvement Plan's hardships and failures illustrates its futility (fig. 2, pg. 6). The pre-channelized meander of the lower river is a counterpoint to the linear trajectory of The Narrows. This research-creation dissertation is guided by the meandering flows of the Don River, drawing, on the one hand, a parallel between the disciplinary linear geometry of The Narrows and its metaphoric connection to the imposition of institutionalized (and institutionalizing) research methods which close off unpredicted and unplanned potentials. On the other, the winding and divergent flows

[25] John Bentley Mays, *Emerald City: Toronto Visited* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1994), 43.

of the meander mirror the process-led and continually unfolding techniques of research-creation. This research-creation does not follow a normative linear trajectory, instead embracing a winding and divergent flow. Writing about the process of writing itself, Jane Alison describes the meander's locating of pleasure in the journey; "there's deliberate slowness, a delight in curving this way or that, luxuriating in diversions, carving slow labyrinths of time."[26]

The concept of the meander as a research-creation curatorial process takes inspiration from the flows of the Don River's pre-straightened path and Manning and Massumi's conceptualization of research-creation. The term 'research-creation' emerges from a Canadian academic context in general and as a funding category in particular. It is necessary to acknowledge that while the term 'research-creation'—also known as 'art-based research' outside of Canada—emerges within the 21st century, artists and academics have crossed disciplinary bounds long before. Research-creation's naming allows those working within institutional spaces to propose and create projects that disrupt the university's major forces of disciplinary method.

Research-creation, following Manning, is allied to *the minor*'s tendency toward *other* forms of research not easily captured by the major.[27] Manning and Massumi tell us that research-creation "is an activity all its own, occurring at the constitutive level of both art practice and theoretical research" that comes into being at a point before research and creation are separated "into the institutional structures that capture and contain their productivity and judge them by conventional criteria for added value."[28] Working from within the major forces of the university institution and its valuation of set methods, research-creation's minor techniques unmoor the structural integrity of the major, "problematizing its normative standards."[29] Similarly, feminist art historian and theorist Natalie Loveless asserts that research-creation offers something "verbified and vertiginous, something that queers normative university discourse, propagating uncanny academic kinship structures and unexpected disciplinary intimacies and alliances."[30] Rather than following the structure of academic disciplines, research-creation meanders along with the conditions of a process' unfolding, traversing disciplines. Within the hyphen of research-creation, an ecology of different practices is

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[26] Jane Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative* (New York: Catapult, 2019), 118.
[27] Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 2016.
[28] Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 89.
[29] Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 1.
[30] Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 57.

expressed, opening up "the differential between making and thinking."[31] The transversality represented by the hyphenation of research and creation proposes "singular forms of knowledge which may be intelligible within current understandings of what knowledge might look like."[32] Research-creation can move beyond its origins as a funding category to generate new forms of experience.

Research-creation is in excess of what can be captured by normative presentations of research; it is "neither art per se nor philosophy: it is study, it is practice, it is speculation."[33] Turning to the medieval definition of art as *the way*—rather than an art 'object'—Manning suggests that the concept of 'art' does not define a finished product for aesthetic/conceptual enjoyment but rather the process—or 'trajectory'—itself.[34] For Manning, research-creation is thus allied to the "artful," or what Raymond Ruyer calls the "aesthetic yield," which is "defined throughout as the in-act of the more-than where the force of form remains emergent."[35] The artful finds affinity with the meandering process of this research-creation exhibition.

The meander as a curatorial process—inspired by the winding flows of Wonscotonach before its straightening via the 'Don Improvement'—follows *the way* rather than remaining tied to the production of a specific and pre-determined exhibitionary *object*. If research-creation is "at its most interesting when it is constitutive of new processes," then the divergent and unpredictable flows of research-creation—as defined by Manning—echo the meander's constitution of new processes, thoughts and potentials that "do not know themselves in advance."[36] Through techniques of research-creation, the curatorial process of this exhibition's coming-into-being followed the flows of its contemporary conditions. Led by process over product, I learned from and adapted to each instance of rupture, shift, and disruption throughout a 5-year timescale that moved through a global pandemic.

2018

I began the curatorial process of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* in the early spring of 2018, renewing my childhood relation to the Don River. The idea of returning to the Don River in this new capacity emerged while working on my dissertation proposal during the doctoral forum. I was developing a project at the intersections of research-creation, the curatorial and feminist site-specific art practice.

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[31] Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 138.
[32] Manning, 27.
[33] Ibid., 13.
[34] Ibid., 28.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 28, 91.

Monika Gagnon encouraged me to think with a site I felt connected to, reigniting my pull toward the Lower Don River and Valley. Researching and writing from Montreal, I poured over digital archives, literally tracing images of the landscape's many lives (fig. 4). My drawing—seen here slicing through the middle of the page—reduced the flows of the pre- and post-canalized river to two simple lines, suggesting a radical departure from what once was. The simplified design—traced, scanned and edited before being turned into a transparent image that could be transposed onto other maps and archival materials—illustrates all that was lost of the river's unique meander after the Don Improvement. In the context of this writing, I have pasted my drawing within the text, playing off of and disrupting the reader's flow, echoing the layered histories of the Don pre- and post-improvement and illustrating research-creation's transversal approach. Here, the image expresses research-creation's 'artful' capacities to do research otherwise—through creative forms of expression that produce knowledge outside of more traditional academic modes. I continued to learn about the Don Improvement Plan through the writings of Jennifer L. Bonnell and Canadian naturalist and Don Valley preservation advocate Charles Sauriol, and thus—led by this drawing—I began a line of questioning around the notion of 'improvement.'

When I began this research-creation, I did not know that the global COVID-19 pandemic would afford so much time and such an unpredictable context that would seed unimagined and generative new directions for my work. For Loveless, research-creation is a practice of love that follows *desire* and "builds spaces and contexts that allow the time and space to experiment in unpredictable directions."[37] During the early stages of this project, site visits, walking, archival research, and drawing came together to allow me to think with the Lower Don Valley and River in new ways. Following what Loveless terms *polydisciplinamory*, which links a "promiscuous curiosity with the mixing and mingling of disciplinary frames," I played with creative modes of encountering the Don River.[38]

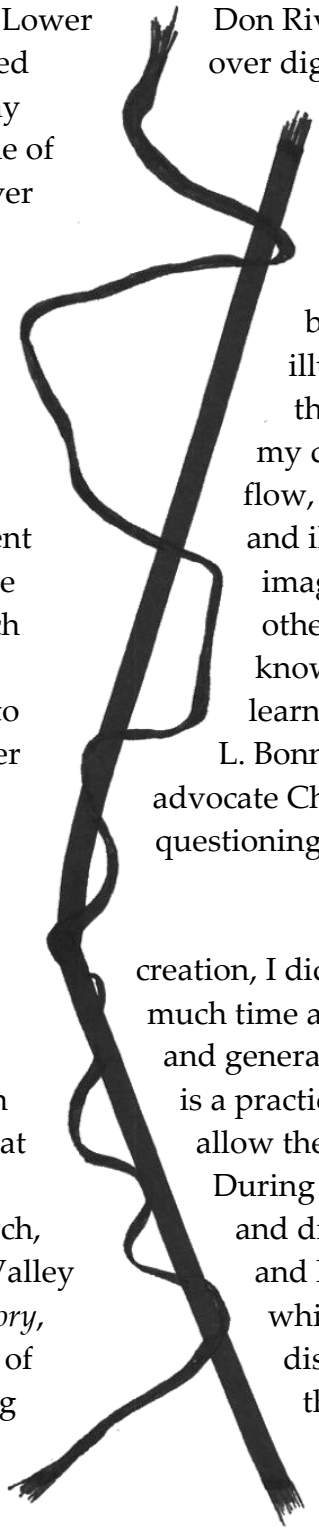

Figure 4
Line drawing of the Don Improvement Plan, by the author, 2018.

[37] Loveless, *Manifesto for Research-Creation*, 70.
[38] Loveless, 71.

The two lines of my drawing contain and provoke questions of much larger discourses around Land stewardship, colonization, and the environment. In this moment of sketching flows, the exhibition's contours began to form, and one of its core research questions emerged; what does it mean to 'improve' the Land?

To answer this question—one that is critical of colonial visioning of Land—through a curatorial research-creation process, I was deeply inspired by the site-specific curatorial practice of Janine Marchessault. Since the late 1980s, Marchessault, beginning with her work in the Public Access Collective, has been critical of the ongoing privatization of public space in large cities such as Toronto. I was interested, in particular, in her large-scale public exhibition project *Land|Slide* (2013), which saw the works of 30 interdisciplinary artists collectively transform the 25 acres of the Markham Museum and Heritage Village, one of the oldest, most culturally diverse and rapidly developing suburbs in North America.

Too often, public artworks are commissioned to meet the functional needs of a site, which had formerly been the domain of landscape architecture or city planning.[39] However, this large-scale exhibition project was not interested in the 'functionality' of public art as it relates to commissions for practical interventions on a site that have some 'use' value to the public, or require the public to engage or perform with the work in a functional, aesthetic or uncritical manner. Instead, the exhibition was more interested in the social and political impact of public art interventions that defamiliarize a site[40], namely, those that aim to shake up traditional forms of political engagement and propose new pathways and ecologies of encounter.

Land|Slide explored "public art's capacity to communicate across diverse communities, to inspire new insights, and to propose generative pathways and ecologies."[41] Focusing on the suburbs of Toronto, particularly Markham, the exhibition began as a way to probe the "tensions between ecology and economy."[42] As a curator, who does not live in Markham, Marchessault was deeply committed to understanding the city, its diaspora, and its connection to the Greenbelt and development. Her curatorial work, and the

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[39] Quentin Stevens and Julia Lossau, *The Uses of Art in Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 4.
[40] Cynthia Hammond, "Urban 'Truths': Artistic Interventions in Post-Socialist Space," in *The Post Socialist City: Continuity and Change in Space and Imagery*, ed. Marina Dmitrieva and Alfrun Kliems (Berlin: iJois Verlag, 2010) 68-85.
[41] Janine Marchessault, *Land Slide: Possible Futures* (Toronto: Public Books, 2015), 13.
[42] Janine Marchessault, "Going Public: Art, Urbanism, and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century," Trudeau Lecture (public lecture, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, BC, January 21, 2014).

works in the exhibition, question the continuing growth of Markham's suburban sprawl, critically probing notions of improvement bound to development and displacement.

Rather than the 'improvement' of a suburban site—that would economize art production and contribute to the ongoing gentrification and expansion of urban places—the exhibition proposed a critical dialogue around the future of such peripheral and uniform spaces (suburbs). Considering the development of suburbs, working with the unique particularities of the Markham Museum and Heritage Village, and its constellation of historic homes from different periods, Marchessault's initial proposition for her collaborating artists was to think with 'the line.' The line(s) forming suburban subdivisions, the line between urban development and the natural environment, and the line between past and present.

In particular, Glynis Logue's *The River*, a 500m construction of 30,000 edible flowers planted in 2013, makes visible the ongoing tensions between nature and nurture, past and present. Working from Marchessault's proposition to think with the line, Logue's meandering river of sunflowers complicates the enduring friction between "human encroachment and emerging environmental innovation."[43] The river of flowers recalls the agrarian history of the site while opening a door unto the possible futures of Markham through its connection to Greenbelt. Logue's work within Marchessault's exhibition parallels this dissertation's connection to the meander and its questioning of land use and improvement through human interventions.[44]

Land politics was another key thematic that ran throughout *Land|Slide* and, in particular, was foundational to *singing our bones home*, 2013, by Métis artist Julie Nagam. *singing our bones home,* exhibited in its first iteration for *Land|Slide*, looked to the Land to uncover the materialities of spaces, objects, bodies, and memories from an Indigenous perspective.[45] Nagam constructed a wigwam projection screen that was housed inside a wagon shed. Situating the wigwam within a wagon shed opened up a dialogue between divergent (perhaps incompatible) architectural structures; the wigwam represents nomadic lifestyles, and the wagon shed symbolizes colonial settlement.[46] *singing our bones home* pays tribute to the many sacred burial grounds unceremoniously entombed beneath urban and rural sites across Canada. This tribute also presents criticism of, and

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[43] "The River," *Land Slide*, accessed August 20, 2022, http://landslide-possiblefutures.com/site.html#river.
[44] This line of thought is further complicated by present interventions at the Don River's mouth through the Port Lands Project and its human interventions to resolve the permanent scars of the Don Improvement Project by attaching a flood-preventing human-made meander to the river's end.
[45] Shana MacDonald, "Reimagining Public Space in Expanded Cinema Exhibition," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 27, no.1 (2018): 16-30.
[46] Julie Nagam, "singing our bones home," in *Land Slide: Possible Futures*, 130.

brings light to, colonial ideologies of the occupation of space that do not account for the beliefs and practices of Indigenous peoples across so-called Canada.[47] A cacophony emerging from 360 binaural recordings of outdoor ambient noise and four different honour songs in the languages of Iroquois, Cree, Anishinaabemowin, and French/Métis honour the disrupted bodies and begin to "sing those bodies back home to the spirit world, or, at the very least, give them some form of peace."[48] Visitors inside the wigwam trigger songs and natural soundscapes through sensors lying beneath a bed of cedar branches.[49] *singing our bones home* is a tribute to bodies that have been disrupted.

Through this immersive installation, Nagam draws audiences into a sacred ceremony to sing home the remains of Indigenous burial grounds as they control the honour songs with their bodies' movement (or stillness). Nagam's work is connected to the Land not as material to be manipulated and aestheticized but as a conduit for trauma, memory and history to be learned and communicated and as a starting point for a grounded healing process. Within the constellation of works presented throughout this dissertation, Land-based and site-specific art tends and attunes to the complexities of place—its histories, geographies, and interlocutors—to bridge connections between the local and larger discourses of decolonization and environment. Inspired by *Land|Slide*'s site-specific and political tendencies and, in particular, Marchessault's commitment to the specificities of a site and Logue and Nagam's installations, I continued my research of the Don River and Valley to better understand the historical and socio-political specificities of the place I was tending.

Just as the formation of this research-creation has been indebted to multiple and diverse practices and modes of inquiry, the written component folds together different—and perhaps seemingly incompatible—epistemologies. Following my personal and political reflections on my relationship with the Don River, and the expansion of decolonial Land-based artistic and curatorial practices, a more traditional account of the site's colonial history is shared in the next section. For my understanding of the site to unfold, knowledge of the history of its colonial development was necessary as a point of departure to critically engage with place. Walking the site with my collaborators, knowledge of the settler-colonial history of this place allowed the opportunity for reflection and a critical analysis of the concept of 'improvement' directly related to the Don Improvement Project. Colonial history, as the most accessible and widely shared, becomes a single node in a constellation of different modes of representation. Here, revisiting a settler-colonial history of the Don River, which too often foregrounds

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[47] Nagam, "singing our bones home," 132.
[48] Nagam, 132.
[49] Ibid.

narratives of progress—another stand-in for 'improvement'—and the celebration of settlers' development of the Land, is counter-balanced by multiple other readings of place. Bonnell's critical approach to Canadian history is the foundation for the following historical account.

History of The Don

The town of York[50] was established at the eastern end of Toronto[51] harbour in 1793. The particular swath of Land encompassing the Don River and Valley was chosen for its ability to provide a more secure and defensible position via the protected waters of Toronto Bay, as opposed to, for example, the Humber River to the west, which outfalls into Lake Ontario.[52] As a less prized waterway for settler visioning, the Humber River avoided the colonial development that fated the Don River and still maintains much of its meandering course, and the mouth's wetlands remain intact. Upper Canada's first Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe established Toronto as the capital during a reconnaissance expedition in the spring of 1793, imagining the curve of the east end of Toronto Bay as an ideal location for development, military defences and trade (fig. 5).

In her book *Reclaiming the Don: An Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley*, Bonnell calls in art historian Albert Boime's concept of the "magisterial gaze" to describe Simcoe's view of the mouth of the Don River. The "magisterial gaze" is a perspective in North American landscape painting during the colonial period through which the viewer assumes an "imaginative control" over the landscape.[53] In landscape painting, this view is occupied from a height down upon a scenic (and, of course, unoccupied) panorama below, for Boime, presenting a direct link to the political and social tenants of 'Manifest Destiny.'[54] Through his colonial vision of the mouth of the river and its surrounds, Simcoe sought to 'civilize' the landscape, which Carolyn Merchant describes as a process of "'reinventing Eden,' wherein acts of improvement become the

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[50] John Graves Simcoe renamed Toronto 'York' after the Duke of York. He was responsible for the erasure of countless Indigenous place names, replacing them with the names of English men. Notably, 'York' was one of the names that did not take hold. Hayden King, "Rising Like a Cloud: New Histories of 'Old' Toronto," in *Indigenous Toronto: Stories that Carry This Place*, ed. Denise Bolduc, et al. (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2021), 12.

[51] *Toronto/Tkaronto/Aterón:to/Tsi Tkarón:to* translates from Mohawk to "*over there is the place of the submerged tree or trees in the water*" and in Wendat as "*abundance* or *a place of plenty*." Ange Loft, "Remember Like We Do," in *Indigenous Toronto: Stories that Carry This Place*, ed. Denise Bolduc, et al. (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2021), 21.

[52] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, xxiii.

[53] Bonnell, 7.

[54] Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting C. 1830-1865* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1991).

mechanism through which to recover a fallen world."[55] Improvement, as a narrative that legitimates transformation, also functions as a justification for the settlement and colonization of the Americas.[56] Simcoe's colonizing vision for the Don River Valley imagined the extractive potentials of the river's water power; the valley as raw material, which would develop the future capital of York and the location as a conduit for transportation and a seat of political power.[57] As a corridor for travel, the Don Valley, like the Carrying Place Trail, was part of an ancient Indigenous trail network connecting Lake Ontario with Lake Simcoe and the upper Great Lakes though it was less frequently used for such purposes.

Figure 5

Peter Russell and Sir David William Smyth, Plan submitted by Order of His Honor the President for the enlargement of York, 1797. Image courtesy of the Toronto Public Library.

[55] Merchant in Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 9.
[56] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 9.
[57] Bonnell, 9.

In October 1793, Simcoe began a survey of the ancient connective artery, the Carrying Place Trail, between Holland Landing (south of Lake Simcoe) and York (Toronto) to map out the roadway lines that would connect York to the Upper Lakes. After a challenging journey, a long straight path (now Yonge Street) was drawn and cut several months later. Simcoe would rename 'his' township's main river, the Don River—after the River Don in Yorkshire, England, derived from the name of the Celtic goddess Dôn—displacing Indigenous land-based knowledge. The meander has held other names. Two were recorded by early surveyors, *Nechenquakekonk* and *Wonscotonach*. There are many translations for Wonscotonach, one appearing in the letters of surveyor Augustus Jones which historian Henry Scadding interpreted as "the river coming down from the back [or possibly black] burnt country, meaning probably the so-called Poplar Plains to the north, liable to be swept by causal fires."[58] Jones' translation is often-cited, however, a more accurate translation can be found in the work of renowned Anishinaabe scholar and Anishinaabemowin language teacher Dr. Basil Johnston. Johnston, interviewed and transcribed by Donald B. Smith in *Sacred feathers: The Reverend Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) and the Mississauga Indians*, tells us that Wonscotonach means "burning bright point or peninsula," a point bright with fire, or made clear by fire[59] which likely refers to the peninsula near the mouth of the Don, now known as the Toronto Islands.[60] Wonscotonach is an Anglicized version of the original word for the Don River—Waasayishkodenayosh—as shared in Dr. Johnson's writings.

From: waussae—bright
ishkstae—fire
naeyaush—point

Indigenous place names suggest greater importance on the lands at the river's mouth rather than on the river itself; Bonnell proposes that for Indigenous peoples of the contact period, "the Don appears to have been less significant than other, larger rivers in the area," such as the Humber.[61] Bonnell continues that "the Don was passed over as a settlement site for larger rivers in the region plac[ing] in greater relief Simcoe's peculiar choice of the river's marshy lowlands as the eastern anchor point for his town of York."[62] It was likely Simcoe's adoration for the 'magisterial gaze' of the defensible curve of the Toronto Bay—which he found at the mouth of the Don—that prompted his 'peculiar' decision to orient the developing town of York around this smaller river. In this tale, the

[58] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 11.
[59] Donald B. Smith, *Sacred feathers: The Reverend Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) and the Mississauga Indians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 256.
[60] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don,* 11.
[61] Bonnell, 11.
[62] Ibid.

larger, more ecologically significant Humber River was protected from a troubled history of development while the Don became entangled in an ill-fated quest for colonial 'improvement.'

The Don 'Improvement'

The 1700-1800s saw the beginning of Toronto's colonial settlement and the Don River's industrialization. Settlers valued the river based on its capacity to facilitate trade, industry, and urban development and as a way to flush away the waste of compact urban life. By the mid-1800s, after much use, the Don River was perceived by the urban public as a menace to public health and an obstacle to the development of Toronto's east end. The "Don problem," as the city and public named it, presented three concerns: "pollution and related concerns about water-borne disease; flooding; and the accumulation of silt around the river mouth."[63] Beginning in the 1850s, various 'improvement' projects were implemented to resolve these issues, proving to be more complex, time-consuming and costly than predicted.[64] Matters were complicated by split concerns between the city and the Harbour Trust. The city of Toronto was invested in prioritizing the upstream flooding and pollution, while the Harbour Trust was concerned with the siltation at the river mouth.[65] City planning and engineering continuously failed to fulfill expectations and alleviate concerns for water quality, flooding and siltation, which continued due to the inability to "adequately comprehend the environment they were working with."[66] Thus, the complex riparian system of the Don River would come to be reimagined as a 'flush' for wastes and a corridor for shipping and rail traffic. Colonial systems of urban living would re-model the river, in the end unsuccessfully, to serve the economic and industrial development of Toronto.

Several floods occurred between the 1850s and 1878 that caused significant damage to city infrastructure and loss of life, further complicating the relationship between the developed waterway and the city. This period of regular seasonal flooding, compounded by ongoing infrastructural interventions, culminated in the devastating flood of 1878. At the height of the unprecedented surge, water levels rose to eight feet above average. Bonnell recounts, "the *Globe* described the scene as 'wild and picturesque in the extreme': 'hundreds of trees floated down the stream, the leafy tops above water. Many anchored in the mud at various points throughout the wide expanse of waters, thus forming what looked like a miniature archipelago'".[67] The flood

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[63] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 45.

[64] Bonnell, 45.

[65] A continuing concern motivating the complete overhaul of the Port Lands, which has been under construction since 2018.

[66] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 45.

[67] Bonnell, 53.

destroyed four of the six bridges that crossed the Lower Don as the wreckage from buildings and bridges upstream created a wave of destruction downriver.[68] The 1878 flood claimed a heavy toll, with the loss of at least two lives and between $200,000 and $400,000 in damage to riverside industries and significant damage to the riverside communities south of Gerrard Street.[69]

Unsurprisingly, the events of the 1878 flood radically altered the relationship between the city and the river. Bonnell describes the resulting actions, noting that "bridges were rebuilt with higher spans and stronger materials; riverside properties were in many cases removed to a safer distance; and mill owners, fewer in numbers by the 1880s began to adopt the practice of opening floodgates in advance of a freshet."[70] The 1878 flood and its consequences made visible the power and unpredictability of nature. Infrastructural interventions on some sections of the lower river were unable to prevent the disastrous effects of "upstream influences and forces at work in other parts of the watershed." [71] In the subsequent years between 1878 and the 1886 Don Improvement Plan, there were few instances of flooding or related damage; however, the impact of the Great Rainstorm of 1878 remained on the minds of Torontonians and, ultimately, became a major motivator for voting in the referendum for the Don Improvement Plan.[72] It is impossible to know what was on the minds of city planners and residents; however, Bonnell asserts, "the flood seems to have reinforced for those most affected the need for technological interventions to tame the unruly river."[73]

The City of Toronto did not take into account the advice of James Worts, co-founder of the Gooderham and Worts mill—which became the well-known distilling company after his death—when he commented in 1878; "there is value in recognizing and accounting for the limits of human knowledge."[74] A settler colonial mindset prioritizes the transformation of the Land rather than working with the existing waterway. Wetlands are seen as material in such "climatic move[s] of settler colonialism," wherein improvement is expressed as attempts at control through the "replacement of original lands with new land structures."[75] Indigenous knowledge systems and relations with the Land were ignored in the history of the Improvement Project. Bonnell describes the

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[68] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 53.
[69] Bonnell, 53.
[70] Ibid., 54.
[71] Ibid., 55.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Worts in Bonnell, 55.
[75] Kate McCoy, Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, *Land Education: Rethinking Pedagogies of Place from Indigenous, Postcolonial, and Decolonizing Perspectives* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 38.

settler mindset which discounted Indigenous custodians who "'left no trace' of their passing: by failing, in terms of Lockean logic, to use the Land to its full capacity," and thus it was asserted by settlers that "they had no legitimate claim to the lands they occupied."[76] In turn, settler control over and extraction from the Land under the guise of 'improvement' became a justification for colonization.

Wonscotonach has always experienced seasonal changes, ebbs and flows caused by rainfall, freezing and thawing, and drought. Recorded history makes visible a settler dread towards the unpredictability of nature and further the desire to tame the meandering river. While we know little about Indigenous use and occupation of the Don watershed during the years before European settlement, the "use of the valley in the contact period appears to have been sporadic and seasonally motivated," attuning to the river's uncontrollable and natural flows.[77] Anecdotal evidence from written recordings by early European settlers suggests that the Mississaugas hunted and fished in the valley at the end of the 17th century but did not establish permanent villages along the river.[78] Rather than viewing annual flood events as a hindrance to progress requiring intervention, early Indigenous inhabitants of the river valley and table lands were likely to use seasonal changes to their advantage. A 1950s Don Valley Conservation Report on the history of the watershed noted, "the yearly enrichment of the meadows or 'flats' made possible to grow corn on them year after year, so that the Indian villages near the river could remain on the same site for long periods" while the high water of floods "enabled a skilled traveller to navigate many parts of the river which at ordinary times were too shallow to be worth attempting."[79] Indeed, severe and sudden floods were less frequent and disastrous in the years before widespread deforestation across the watershed led by settler development, but they still occurred occasionally.[80] Development of the city of Toronto during the 19th century and the destruction of the Don watershed meant that flooding events only continued to increase, causing massive infrastructural damage and even loss of life.

Early in the 1880s and long before, the Lower Don River from Bloor Street to its mouth followed a meandering course through weedy marshes like those we find at the base of the Rouge, Credit and Humber Rivers today.[81] According Sauriol, the plan for the Don Improvement Project was inspired by the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio, when

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[76] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 10.
[77] Bonnell, 10.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., 52.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Charles Sauriol, *Remembering the Don: A Rare Record of Earlier Times Within the Don Valley* (Toronto: Consolidated Amethyst Communications, 1981), 122.

Toronto Mayor John McMurrich saw the highly developed river in person during a visit arranged on the occasion of the funeral of President Garfield.[82] The Cuyahoga, whose flows have been disciplined into a trajectory most suited to industry, modelled the potentials of a straightened river to boost the economy and shortly, Alderman Davies (a politician under Mayor McMurrich) formed a company to purchase the necessary swath of Land around the Don River for this massive engineering project. A release in the *Globe* in 1881 reads, "proposed to form a company to render the Don navigable for large craft. The project of improving and utilizing the River Don, which has engaged the attention of one or two individuals at various times, bids fair to take a practicable shape."[83]

The suggested 'improvements' undertaken via this straightening project were to increase industry and transport through the Don Valley corridor drastically. The river was to be straightened, widened and deepened, and an additional railway entrance to Toronto was to be built on both banks of the Don and roads and streets next to the river.[84] The lower river between Winchester Street and the Grand Trunk Railway bridge at Eastern Avenue was to be channelized, deepening the once winding marshy waterway to 12 feet below lake level and widening it to 120 feet across.[85] In March 1886, the 'Don Improvement Act' was passed by the provincial legislature, allowing the city to borrow funds and expropriate lands for the project.[86] On September 27 of the same year, the people of Toronto went to the polls in a public referendum "to improve and straighten the river Don to secure sanitary condition of that part of the City of Toronto contiguous to the said river."[87] The public supported the project, and construction began the following month. According to Bonnell, for residents of the East End, the Improvement Project presented opportunities for 'prosperity and revitalization' for an area set out at the margin to the developing West End.[88] Imaginaries of the Don River as a clean, large and fast-moving waterway supporting travel and industry by water-fueled public support for the 'improvement.'

The initial proposal for the Don Improvement Act was highly ambitious and quickly presented a series of unforeseen difficulties. The improvement exceeded the original budget of $300,000, and by January 1889, the cost had reached 50 percent over estimates

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[82] Sauriol, *Remembering the Don*, 122.
[83] Sauriol, 122.
[84] Ibid., 123.
[85] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 55.
[86] Jennifer Bonnell, "The Don Narrows," Don Valley Historical Mapping Project, accessed December 3, 2021, https://maps.library.utoronto.ca/dvhmp/
[87] Sauriol, *Remembering the Don*, 123.
[88] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 55.

and ran well over the proposed timelines, with sections two and three of the three-part improvement plan finally completed three years behind schedule in 1891.[89] A multitude of factors contributed to the overruns in the initial project's cost and timeline, including the expropriation of lands along the route of the improvement; a dispute with the CPR, who claimed exclusive rights to the use of tracks on the west side of the river; environmental issues particularly in winter and the (unforeseen) dense clay and shale deposits along the channel lining north of Queen Street.[90] The original and ambitious proposal for a navigable channel was quickly stalled by the discovery of massive amounts of shale, and thus, the Don Improvement Plan had to be revised. The original proposal of a 12-foot depth was modified to only eight or nine feet for the section north of Gerrard Street.[91] The difference of three to four feet in depth significantly impacted the original vision of the Don River as a sister to the channelized Cuyahoga River. The Don Improvement would not allow industry-supporting water travel. The final channel also failed to deliver on the original promise of 'pollution flushing' as the wide and shallow channel would not accommodate the necessary flows to flush wastes. Bonnell suggests that the final project was 'fragmentary' in its failings to modify the river to the original specifications and distance; in the end, the actual length from the 1886 proposal between Bloor Street and the lake was only partially channelized and to a much smaller scale than initially proposed. Sauriol recounts the changes to the landscape:

> Gone the small five islands in the stream between Queen and Winchester streets; gone care-free ice skating on the river; the boating to picnic spots upstream. With '*the Don Improvement*,' the last vestiges of a sylvan lower Don Valley disappeared forever (emphasis in original).[92]

Alterations to the river's meandering flow only created new problems at the mouth of the Don. At the river's mouth, the Improvement Project had done nothing for the growing concern with siltation in the Toronto Harbor. The early 1890s saw frightening levels of sewage and cattle wastes accumulating in the shallow waters of Ashbridge's Bay, creating fear for public health and forcing the city into action.[93] In 1892 the Toronto city council approved a plan from city engineer E. H. Keating to build an east-west channel "along the northern perimeter of the marsh, with cuts through the government breakwater on the west side of the marsh and the sandbar at the northeast extremity of Ashbridge's Bay" accordingly carrying waste further out into the lake.[94] Thus, the Don's

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[89] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 62.
[90] Bonnell, 64.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Sauriol, *Remembering the Don*, 123.
[93] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 66.
[94] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 66.

mouth would be diverted into an east-west channel out to the lake. The plan was implemented in 1893; work began in July 1909 after years of disputes between the City and Harbor Trust. In 1912, after a series of studies, the newly incorporated Toronto Harbor Commission proposed two options for the final enforcement of the channel, the first would extend the existing north-south channel of The Narrows and the second was to divert the channel west into the Bay.[95] While the primary objective of the channel was the diversion of silts from the harbour, making the first proposal the most logical, the second proposal of a west-flowing ship channel was adopted for its ability to create more space for dockage. After some back-and-forth with the British American Oil Company, whose property was along the proposed diversion, the final amendment to what became known as the Keating Channel was made. To avoid BA Oil property, the river's diversion would no longer be a curve but a sharp right-angled connection between the extended Don Narrows and the Keating Channel. In its final iteration, the Keating Channel was dredged in 1914 and, by Spring 1915, was reinforced, and the Don River was diverted for the last time.[96]

Following the settler-colonial logic of expanding and using the river for economic development, rather than respecting the Land's knowledge, only led to adding more and new interventions or 'improvements' that continue today. A critical reading of the Don Improvement, which attends to and acknowledges the ecological impacts and failures of settler 'improvements' on the Land, is a mode of "decolonizing the local."[97] For land education scholars Kate McCoy, Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, this process involves "assessing how different colonial processes impacted a place and subsequently shaped it, informing the notions of territoriality present in that space today."[98] Looking back upon the history of a place such as the Lower Don allows me, my collaborators and those experiencing the exhibition to understand that the Land on which we live and work as uninvited guests was "illegally and violently taken."[99] The history of Toronto that has been recounted to me throughout my childhood and young adulthood framed the city's industrialization through a triumphant narrative of progress and certainly never mentioned Indigenous presence before, during, or after contact. While I have moved through the lower Don Narrows hundreds of times over 20-some years, it wasn't until I learned of the interventionist 'Don Improvement' that I began to understand how the local places so familiar to me are embedded in a history of violence. McCoy, Tuck

[95] Bonnell, 67.
[96] Ibid.
[97] McCoy, Tuck and McKenzie, *Land Education*.
[98] McCoy, Tuck and McKenzie, 28.
[99] Ibid.

and McKenzie assert that "this ignorance is actually a product of how gaps in knowledge are actively produced in order to protect power."[100]

Citing American history textbooks from the early 2000s, McCoy, Tuck, and McKenzie note that "the thematic of 'improvement of land use' signals an inevitability of settler expansion as well as a particular set of utilitarian and extractive ethics with the Land."[101] Presenting differences between Indigenous and settler cultures concerning land use as a justification for colonization and development. They tell us that land education is so important because it asks us to "rethink [our] relation to land as a dynamic ecological and cultural project of recovery and rehabilitation" and to ask how our "identities with place have been constructed and whose have been omitted in settler curricula."[102]

The Don River and Valley is a highly altered place with a complicated and futile history of colonial development and is a material site that communicates its history. The detritus of failed development projects and worn concrete walls of the Improvement Project's *Narrows* have made the impact of settler visions for the Land visible. As a mediated urban-natural valley and waterway, the Lower Don has captured the critical imaginaries of so many ecological and political advocates. Following the critical (re)reading of the history of the Lower Don River and Valley, I turn to a history of artists' and activists' engagement with the river.

Charles Sauriol and Don Conservation

The Don River has been heavily urbanized and changed through Toronto's development. The mediated and ever-shifting landscape has historically, and still today, drawn in artists, activists and the public who investigate, advocate for, and enjoy the waterway. According to Jennifer Bonnell, the "neglected, highly altered landscape" is a unique and hopeful site as it continues to inspire tending and appreciation despite its somewhat degraded, polluted and heavily urbanized character[103]. Looking back to earlier activism along the Don River, the influential work of Toronto conservationist Charles Sauriol must be included.[104] Sauriol (1904-1995) and his family spent every summer from 1927 to 1968 living in a rustic cottage within the urban wilderness of the

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[100] McCoy, Tuck and McKenzie, *Land Education*, 29.

[101] McCoy, Tuck and McKenzie, 32.

[102] Ibid., 33.

[103] Jennifer Bonnell, "Episode 1: Remembering the Don," Don River Radio, Podcast, July 8, 2022, https://anchor.fm/donriverradio/episodes/Episode-1-Remembering-the-Don-with-Jennifer-Bonnell.

[104] Throughout his life, Sauriol authored six books about the Don Valley detailing his lived experience of this place as a cottager, conservationist and admirer of the river and valley. These books provide an invaluable archive of his experience in the rapidly changing and highly contested landscape throughout his near hundred-year life.

Don River Valley at the Forks of the Don.[105] During these 40 years, he bore witness to the valley's radical shift from "a picturesque setting of rural farms and woodlands to an increasingly threatened corridor of urban green space."[106] Sauriol's career as a conservationist, from the 1940s to the 1990s, saw him work tirelessly as a "fervent champion" of the Don Valley during various significant events that completely changed the landscape he once knew.[107] His connection to the Don began somewhat ironically and through familial ties. Sauriol's father, Joseph, moved to the city in 1886 from eastern Ontario when he took up work operating one of the dredges preparing the Lower Don for the Don Improvement. Sauriol summered in and advocated for the Don through the construction of the Don Valley Parkway in the late 1950s, followed by initiatives to protect the floodplain lands in the early 1960s.[108]

In September 1989, the East Don Valley received protection as a nature reserve in the Toronto Parks system and was named the Charles Sauriol Conversation Reserve.[109] The sixty-seven hectares of protected valley lands stretch from the Forks of the Don northeast to Eglinton Avenue.[110] The same year also marked continued citizen investment in the Don with the creation of the Task Force to Bring Back the Don.[111] Bonnell notes that Sauriol's life-long investment in the Don Valley and River continued on a growing legacy of care and that "by the time of Sauriol's death in 1995, the river had re-emerged as a symbol of urban health—specifically, the health of the relationship between urban residents and the natural environment on which they depend."[112] Not only have environmental activists been drawn to the Don River and Valley, but artists have also engaged with the particularities of this highly developed urban natural swath of Land.

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[105] Jennifer Bonnell, "An Intimate Understanding of Place: Charles Sauriol and Toronto's Don River Valley, 1927-1989," *The Canadian Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (December 2011): 607.
[106] Bonnell, "Intimate Understanding of Place," 607.
[107] Bonnell, 608.
[108] Ibid., 609.
[109] Sauriol's legacy has continued with the work of the Task Force to Bring Back the Don, which was disbanded in 2010 and current initiatives such as Don't Mess with the Don formed by trail users who are concerned with the state of Toronto's green spaces and organize volunteer clean-up days to collect and remove garbage from the highly polluted river and valley as well as stewardship initiatives and advocacy work. Recently Don't Mess with the Don members have been advocating against the construction of the Metrolinx Don Valley Layover facility in the valley lands below the Prince Edward Viaduct.
[110] Bonnell, "Intimate Understanding of Place," 635.
[111] The Task Force and its many citizen volunteers have planted tens of thousands of trees, shrubs and wildflowers in the Lower Don Valley and removed tons of garbage from the same area.
[112] Bonnell, "Intimate Understanding of Place," 635.

Artists and the Don River

As a highly mediated urban-natural landscape, the Don River has long been a site of artistic intervention and creative thought. In 1969 the environmental organization Pollution Probe, today one of Canada's longest-running and most impactful environmental justice groups held a mock funeral for the 'deceased' Don River along the canalized Narrows. The collective of University of Toronto professors and students gathered together to stage the event at the river. A one-hundred-car caravan—including a hearse, somberly dressed mourners carrying flowers, and a band—travelled from the university grounds to the river north of the Bloor Street Viaduct.[113] The funeral's organizer Martin Daly spoke to a crowd of about two hundred people about the river's history of development and 'improvements' which had contributed to its abuse and, ultimately, the state of its degradation and heavy pollution. A student—dressed as eighteenth-century writer and artist, and wife of John Graves Simcoe, Elizabeth Simcoe—acted as the river's widow, crying and reading Simcoe's diary excerpts that described the river's once lively and lush environment of salmon and waterfowl.[114] The elaborate funeral culminated when Daly tossed a ceremonial wreath into the river, after which he concluded to an audience of mourners, "and now, we await the resurrection."[115] At this time in the Don's vast history, the river was gaining attention as a symbol of the present "environmental degradation and mismanagement" caused by urban development. Such theatrical and urgent public performances were becoming common in activist groups such as Greenpeace.[116] The funeral for the Don was heavily publicized and affected calls to action to clean up and make the river more accessible; however, the river's high pollution levels and flooding issues continue today.

On July 13, 2022, New York City-based art collective Mare Liberum held a second mock memorial for the river. *Funeral for a River* was held on the site of the Lower Don as part of the collective's project *In Which We Draw A People's Map of the Don*. Recalling Pollution Probe's 1969 funeral performance, Mare Liberum staged a puppet procession from Evergreen Brickworks to the Don River. Mare Libernum's procession considered what has already been lost and what we may stand to lose or gain through continued relations with the river. Speculating on the future of the Don through contemporary conservation efforts such as the Port Lands Protection Project and the Don Mouth Renaturalization, as well as highly criticized interventions such as the Metrolinx new railway infrastructures.[117] The collective asked, "how might we reinterpret the funeral

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[113] Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don*, 132.

[114] Bonnell, 132.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

[117] As part of their GO Expansion Program, Metrolinx is proposing the development of three new layover facilities, one of which (The Don Valley Layover Facility) will be located north of the Prince Edward

for a river as a chance to hold a ritual or ceremony that recognizes what is both lost and what might possibly be regained? How might a funeral for a river present both an endpoint and a new beginning?"[118] More than 50 years after the Don's first mock funeral, activists, artists and visitors of the river and valley once again gathered to mourn the Don that once was—before 'improvements' and development radically altered the natural landscape—to pay tribute to, and consider the possible futures of, the neglected yet much-loved waterway.

In the fall of 2017, artist duo Life of a Craphead created a life-size replica of King Edward VII's statue, which they floated down the Don River as part of the Evergreen Don River Valley Park Art Program. The performance, *King Edward VII Equestrian Statue Floating Down the Don River* (2017), was a call to address the impacts of colonialism on the Land, drawing together two disparate historical moments; firstly, the statue's administrative history and secondly, the oft-told fictionalized story that in 1958 the Don River was chlorinated and perfumed on the occasion of Princess Margaret's visit to Toronto.[119] The imagery of the massive statue floating down the canalized river places the inherent absurdity of the colonial symbolism of such monuments, and the failed Don Improvement, into stark relief. The actual King Edward VII statue, which currently stands in Queen's Park, Toronto, was initially commissioned in the early 20th century by the All Indian Memorial Committee to memorialize the short-reigning King. It was produced by renowned colonial sculptor Thomas Brock for the city of Delhi before being removed post-independence and relocated to its present site, the British Commonwealth of Canada. South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC) executive director Indu Vashist describes this movement; "the statue resided in Delhi for the first half of the 20th century and was exiled along with its other colonial compatriots to another British colony, one that still bows its head to the Commonwealth and abides by colonial logic. That is how Eddie and his horse Kildare arrived in Toronto."[120] The "highly photogenic" site-specific work created a striking allusion to many of the anxieties that have emerged around the processes of settler colonialism in Canada.[121] Fallen from its

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Viaduct at Bloor Street East, between the Don Valley Parkway and Lower Don Trail along the (presently not operational) Don Branch Rail Corridor. The Don Valley Layover Facility will be used to reduce congestion at Union Station and provide train storage and maintenance. The proposal has been heavily criticized due to the environmental impacts on a sensitive part of the Don Valley. The Don Valley Layover Facility will disrupt wildlife migration, damage the fragile ecosystem that has recently been restored and interrupt the Lower Don River recreational trail.

[118] "Funeral for a River," People's Map of the Don River, accessed August 29, 2022, https://www.donriverradio.ca/events/funeralforthedon.

[119] Indu Vashist, "Eddie and Me," Canadian Art, last modified December 7, 2017, https://canadianart.ca/essays/eddie-and-me/.

[120] Vashist, *Eddie and Me*, online.

[121] Vashist, online.

perch at the center of colonial Queen's Park in Downtown Toronto the drowning statue slowly trudged through murky waters of the straightened and channelized Lower Don River, displacing the statue's monumentality and calling attention to the vestiges of the formerly meandering river.

Evergreen's Don River Valley Park Art Program[122], curated by Kari Cwynar, has staged several other temporary public artworks along the Don River. Varying in their timescale, performances and more semi-permanent installations have delved into the complex ecology of the river and valley and its many histories and interlocutors. Will Kwan's *A Park for All* (2018) can still be seen along the reinforcing walls of The Narrows (until 2023). Kwan's intervention is a hand-painted text installation that speaks to the various and often conflictual constituents of Toronto's public spaces, referencing engagements with urban parks more generally and the Don River Valley Park in particular. The artist's text speaks to the complex and diverse network of the lower river and valley, reading, for example, "A park for conservationists. A park for developers." "A park for landlords. A park for renters." "A park for the homeless. A park for elders." "A park for descendants. A park for ancestors."[123] Troubling a utopian view of public space as open and equally of service to all, Kwan's list of Toronto's constituents represents the highly conflictual realities of this place and its historical transference from margin to center and back again. Kwan's work folds together and contrasts the many—often counterintuitive—relations that are brought into being at this unique and highly transformed public site.

In 2019 and 2022 the Toronto Biennial of Art's two-part programming expressed Toronto's complicated relation to its shoreline and various waterways at large. The 2019 Biennial, *The Shoreline Dilemma*, engaged the city's changing shoreline, particularly its radical alterations during the colonial era which has led to vast swaths of devastated Land—such as the Port Lands (currently undergoing revitalization). The 2019 Biennial spread across gallery and alternative spaces mainly near the city's shoreline with Lake Ontario. The theme of the first Toronto Biennial signals a growing urgency around the shifting waterways of Toronto in an increasing anthropocentric world, asking, "what does it mean to be in relation?"[124] Taking the 'shoreline dilemma'—also called the 'coastline paradox'—as a starting point, the Biennial looked to the "breakdown of scientific conventions in the face of nature's complexities," particularly in the instance of

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[122] Another significant installation from Evergreen's Don River Valley Park Art Program— Duane Linklater's *Monsters for Beauty, Permanence and Individuality* (2017)—will be discussed in Chapter 2.
[123] Will Kwan, *A Park for All*, 2018. Installation.
[124] "The Shoreline Dilemma: 2019 Guidebook", Toronto Biennial of Art, accessed August 20, 2022, https://torontobiennial.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/TBA_Guidebook.pdf.

Toronto's waterfront, which has been heavily developed and ill-managed.[125] Tending to the impacts of colonization on the changing topography of Toronto and its shoreline the Biennial posed many of the same questions as this dissertation.

A few of the works in the 2019 Biennial moved slightly inland, in particular, Maria Thereza Alves' *Phantom Pain* (2019), which spoke to the Don River, will be discussed in Chapter 2. The 2022 Biennial, *What Water Knows, The Land Remembers*, continued to probe Toronto's water ecologies focusing on tributaries—above ground and hidden—such as Etobicoke Creek, the Laurentian Channel, Garrison Creek, and Taddle Creek. Across two biennials, and three years, water was centered as a way to attune to "its ecologies, its adaptations, its sense of time, its cycles."[126] The two-part Toronto Biennial mirrors this research-creation's investment in staying-with water. The works in the exhibition *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* also tend to water's knowledge, ability to transform and transgress colonial control.

Some of the aforementioned works were ephemeral, while others remain on site of the lower Don River. Echoing the layering of nature, development, and renaturalization, the experience of walking the lower river with the exhibition, *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*, will intersect and overlap with existing artistic commentaries in situ.

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[125] "The Shoreline Dilemma."

[126] "What Water Knows, The Land Remembers: 2022 Guidebook", Toronto Biennial of Art, accessed September 20, 2022, https://torontobiennial.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TBA_2022_Guidebook_20220317.pdf.

Chapter 2: 'Tributaries'
A confluence of theory, methods, exhibitions and literature

Tributaries are the smaller rivers or streams that flow into a main river, draining the surrounding watershed. The Don River's flows are divided into east and west tributaries that join together at the Forks of the Don, affectionately named *the Forks*, just south of Overlea Boulevard, where Don Mills Road crosses the river. Gathering the streams of thought that have flowed into this research-creation—continuing this dissertation's chronological unfolding through time—this chapter will bring together scholarship that has developed an unsettled approach to site-specific research-creation curatorial techniques. This chapter takes tributaries' formation of a larger river as a model for the following confluence of concepts, theories, methodologies, literature, and exhibition reviews.

Learning with *place*

The significance of place—its history, culture, human and natural communities—was a starting point for this research-creation. The following expansion of place is constellated around *critical place theory*, led by decolonizing and Indigenous methodologies. For Tuck and McKenzie this approach to research "takes up critical questions and develops corresponding methodological approaches that are informed by the embeddedness of social life in and with places," and they continue, responds to issues of "globalization, neoliberalism, settler colonialism, and environmental degradation."[127] Theories of place are complicated by settler-colonial histories and practices of engaging with Land. A focus on place in critical research tends to the "ways in which land and environmental issues intersect with social issues and social life."[128] I take place as a starting point to ground this research-creation dissertation's engagement with the social practices of walking and site-specific research committed to unsettling colonial visions of and engagement with Land.

Place as a concept is tied to geography. It is focused on the specificities of either a geographical location or the non-exchangeability of one place with another.[129] These definitions of place fail to account for the individual's experience,[130] inflected by gender, race, nationality, access, and mobility.[131] According to geographers Ben Anderson and

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[127] Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 2.
[128] Tuck and McKenzie, 2.
[129] Franco Farinelli in Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 7.
[130] Elijah Harper speaks to his experience in his soundscape for *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* titled *A harmony with the straight and narrow*. His work narrates his particular queer and racialized experience of being with the Lower Don River.
[131] Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 7.

Paul Harrison, "the terminology of 'place' is seen by some as ignoring process, power relations, and remaining too bounded."[132] In social science research place is often understood as a backdrop for inquiry, as a context and not a starting point and focus of research.[133] Tuck and McKenzie are critical of how place has been taken up in the social sciences as a peripheral aspect of research, not as a core component of the analysis, research and methodological development.[134] Place is steeped in history and story and plays a mediating role in social relations and meaning-making.[135] It is not peripheral; it forms and informs histories, lives, relations and experiences.

Places shape our identities; in turn, they are also shaped by people. They are personal in their capacity to help us relate to and understand ourselves and the world around us. They are political, particularly in the context of Canada's colonial history, through which many places have been, and continue to be, stolen and exploited. They are also often taken for granted; becoming the background of our daily lives. Traces of the layered histories of human and more-than-human relations that are both visible and invisible are too often glossed over or left untended. People regularly pass through places unconsciously, unaware that the Land is writing itself into them just as they inscribe themselves onto it. What happens when we pay attention to place, learn from and through that knowledge, and unlearn the histories and worldviews taught us through a Western colonial frame?

As bell hooks tell us, "if we listen, nature will teach us."[136] Thinking about place is becoming more and more urgent in our contemporary moment. As we live and die in the wake of geo-logics that span Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia, turning Land into territory for exploitation to the nth degree.[137] Anthropocene discourse and the naming of the Anthropos- locate the cause and effects of destruction with "Man" as a singular agent. This move flattens differences and renders invisible other ways of doing life by lumping all of humanity together as if all peoples everywhere share the same destructive tendencies. Of course, this is not the case, and the major forces in creating the conditions of our current geologic epoch are, in fact, a limited few. However, anthropogenic effects are felt by us all to varying degrees; "the rise of agriculture and

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[132] Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, *Taking-Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography* (London: Routledge, 2010), 9.
[133] Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 9.
[134] Tuck and McKenzie, 9.
[135] Doreen Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
[136] bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 25.
[137] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 10.

attendant deforestation; the extraction of coal, oil, and gas, and their atmospheric consequences; the combustion of carbon-based fuels and emissions; coral reef loss; ocean acidification; soil degradation; a rate of life-form extinction occurring at thousands of times higher than throughout most of the last half-billion years." [138] The colonial logics of conquest, slavery and capitalism have devastated our Earth, and the unimaginable scale of the Anthropocene—and its statistics, images and temporalities—are alienating and untenable. How can we connect to the Land at scales outside our capacity to comprehend and be affected?

Tuck and McKenzie tell us, "Land and environmental issues intersect with social issues and social life."[139] Further, academic discourse has recently come to recognize that "alternative, long-held, comprehensive and theoretically sophisticated understandings of place exist outside, alongside, against and within the domain of the Western philosophical tradition."[140] Within Indigenous perspectives understandings of place are "often framed in terms of land."[141] Together, Indigenous and Western theorizations of Land and place, respectively, "serve as a rejoinder," "to mark how theories of the West have also been shaped by its colonial and settler pursuits."[142] It is in the specificity of place that artists, curators, researchers—and those engaging with the work of artists, curators and researchers—can rehearse embodied practices with the Land to recognize our relationship and responsibility.

In the context of this research-creation doctoral work, the most pressing issues at stake are the early and continued role of spatial and place-based practices in the project of settler colonialism—specifically, a critical re-reading of the concept of 'improvement' in relation to the colonial development of Land—and the "intergenerational injustices entailed in loss of place and species and the increasing possibility of human extinction due to climate change."[143] Here, an attunement to the specificities of '*a*' place—Wonscotonach (The Don River)—creates the conditions for 'other' histories, narratives and modes of engaging with a place to emerge. In the face of climate devastation—and, in 2020, a global pandemic—a local scale presents an opportunity for meaningful decolonial work to take hold.

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[138] Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 4.
[139] Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 2.
[140] Tuck and McKenzie, 11.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid., 2.

Places change over time. Boundaries, geographies, inhabitants, built environment, water levels, etc., change over millennia, by the season, and by the moment. Returning to place, as I have repeatedly returned to the Don River over the last five years, I have noticed changes in the water levels from year to year and season to season. Each Fall, the water levels appear lower and lower, exposing more of the river bed and roots of trees lining the Don River (fig. 6 and 7). Places are articulations of time-space or the entwining of history and geography.[144] Within this conceptualization, place is "a particular constellation within the wider topographies of space, and as in process, an unfinished business."[145] Places can orient us across time and space and in relation to the global circulations of material and immaterial forces. The layered histories of physical processes and human and more-than-human interlocutors steep places. The water levels of a small river in Downtown Toronto, when attuned to across time, may become an accessible marker of the inconceivable global and geological scales of the Anthropocene.

Figure 6

The Narrows facing south from the Riverdale Park Viaduct, September 26, 2020.

[144] Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 9.
[145] Massey, *For Space*, 131.

Figure 7

The Narrows facing north from the Riverdale Park Viaduct, September 26, 2020.

Within a Western worldview, place—as Land, as nature—is separated from, and located in opposition to, the human. Nature is outside, and thus "humans do not perceive themselves as part of/as shaped by place." [146] On the one hand, a dualistic relation is suggested between pristine and untouched nature and civilized and civilizing social life. In this limited and limiting worldview, places become a backdrop for human activity.[147] The purpose of this dualism is primarily the justification of colonization via narratives of 'Manifest Destiny' and the perceived right to European ownership of pastoral and unoccupied Land. We know this narrative to be a myth. In reality, nature and Land are not external; "land with its physical features, climate, other species, and other aspects can act on and in conjunction with social histories and introduce influences to form current human practices of ritual and ceremony; architecture planning and design;

[146] Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 32.

[147] Shelby Lisk's video diptych, *All that will remain*, screened in *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* presents a critical view of settler colonial relations to Land as separate from humans, instead articulating the connectivity between all things.

educational traditions; and leisure pastimes."[148] Identities and social behaviours are, in many ways, developed and determined by place. In turn, places are shaped by social practices. Of course, these relations are not without struggles of and for power.

Claims on Land—and the histories of Land—have been contested throughout the history of Canada to justify and support colonial rule. In a Canadian context, we must be aware that the production of memory and history of place(s) is not neutral. Some memories are inscribed at the expense of others.[149] Place in a Western worldview is determined by humans. However, 'meeting places' are sites "not only of human histories, spatial relations, and related social practice but also of related histories and practices of land and other species."[150]

The 'lure of the local'

Art historian and critic Lucy Lippard's definition of place—though it is bound to a human subjectivity, which the work of this dissertation seeks to expand beyond—offers an entry point to define the pull that is felt towards certain landscapes and that initiated this research-creation. For Lippard, the force of place that operates on us is the 'lure of the local.' The lure is "the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere."[151] She suggests that place—in contradistinction to landscape, which is seen from the outside—is seen from the inside. Her book, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, is interested in contemporary art's multiple senses of place and how landscape affects our lives. In 1997, Lippard called for a particular approach to making place-specific art, suggesting; "of all the art that purports to be about place, very little can be said to be truly *of* place."[152] When her book was published, Lippard's call for attunement to the specificities of place was spurred by the ever-expanding scale of networked exchange (and access) across the globe. The departicularization brought forth by globalization and capitalist expansion exacerbated modernist tendencies toward universalization.[153] While modernism developed geographical hierarchies between center and periphery—furthering capitalist imperatives to develop these peripheries—postmodernism's reaction saw increased cultivation of "diverse local particularities."[154]

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[148] Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 32.
[149] David Harvey, *Justice, nature and the geography of difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 309.
[150] Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 43.
[151] Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 7.
[152] Lippard, *Lure of the Local*, 20.
[153] Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).
[154] Kwon, *One Place*, 157.

Lippard's *The Lure of the Local* continues to be of the most well-known and oft-cited texts representing a turn, in art, to the specificities of place. In her call for contemporary art that is *of* place, Lippard is encouraging work that presents a "holistic vision of place."[155] She contends that identity is fundamentally tied to place and that uprooting our lives from specific places—through migration, diaspora, and forced displacement—has caused a disconnect. Further, this contemporary condition can be seen as a primary cause for "our loss of touch with nature, disconnection from history, spiritual vacancy, and estrangement from our own sense of self."[156]

According to Korean curator and art historian Miwon Kwon, Lippard argues that we need to pay closer attention to place and its role in forming identity and cultural values. Consequently, a "relationship to place [can be] a means of countering the trends of the dominant capitalist culture."[157] However, Lippard's work can be criticized for its nostalgic impulse, specifically her call for a slower, more sedentary mode of existence and a return to the "vernacular, nonurban sociality of small-scale spaces and face-to-face exchanges."[158] Kwon suggests that Lippard's thinking misses French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre's insights on the *dialectical* rather than oppositional relationship between "the increasing abstraction of space and the 'production' of particularities of place, local specific, and cultural authenticity."[159] We must be aware that the production of difference is a fundamental activity of capitalism. Thus, the work of this research-creation does not seek to create instances of difference to be commodified—or that can become easily commodified—instead, it will intervene in the complex history of the river's exploitation, industrialization, commodification and gentrification.

Within the last 20 years, there has been a slow return to the local in an attempt to buck the hold of capitalism and reconcile with the scars of the Anthropocene (left on Land, bodies, and minds). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified this return to the local, out of the necessity of stay-at-home orders, travel, and gathering restrictions. Though it is impossible to theorize the effects of the global pandemic on local and place-based art-making practices from within the thick of it, the emergence of localized art and exhibitionary projects within the city of Toronto present a window unto the shifting contours of what might be defined as 'Land art' towards the complexities and

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[155] Kwon, *One Place*, 158.
[156] Kwon, 158.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid., 159.
[159] Ibid.

specificities of the local and our individual, and collective experiences of and with Land and the specifies of place.[160]

Knowing the history of the Lower Don River and Valley's colonial development under the guise of 'improvement,' I was deeply impacted by the visible scars I continued to find during walks on the Lower Don Trail. During the Spring of 2018, I walked the Lower Don River on a visit to Toronto, returning to this familiar place with an entirely new vision of the river, flooded by a developing knowledge of the history of the river's canalization—via the Don Improvement. Attuned to this history I began noticing small pieces of infrastructure bent on taming the river and places where it refused its colonial bounds. I walked up and down the Don from the Prince Edward Viaduct, south and back. Walking, throughout the research and curatorial process, has been an essential technique for attuning to the specificities of this particular site. Walks have been conducted with friends, my mother, my partner and artist collaborators between 2018 and 2022. A critical conceptualization of walking as a research-creation method in the context of curatorial practice helped me understand this place as an event-in-process.[161]

Walking as research-creation technique

Walking has long been a thinking practice, a way to increase the flow of thought. The term 'peripatetic,' meaning 'one who walks from place to place,' originated with Aristotle, who employed walking as a thinking practice in ancient Athens.[162] Writer and activist Rebecca Solnit tells us that "the association between walking and philosophizing became so widespread that central Europe has places named after it: the celebrated Philosophenweg in Heidelberg, where Hegel is said to have walked; the Philosophen-damm in Königsberg, where Kant passed on his daily stroll (now replaced by a railway station); and the Philosopher's Way Kierkegaard mentions in Copenhagen."[163] Walking has also been practiced by a range of contemporary artists, including; André Cadere, Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, Janet Cardiff, Georges Bures Miller, Lygia Clark, Marina Abramović, and General Idea (to name just a few). Walking can become a political act or intervention, a way of fostering a connection with a place, an aesthetic or sculptural action, or a mode of social encounter. It is a way of engaging the mind and the world

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[160] Examples of recent site-attentive Toronto-based projects include: *this so-called reclaimed Land has lain bone dry* (2021) by Marina Fathalla; *The Space Between Waves* (2021) and *Where the Trees Speak* (2021) by Wave Art Collective, all of which exist as online exhibitions.

[161] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

[162] Randy Lee Cutler, "On speculative walking: From the peripatetic to the peristaltic." *C Magazine* 121, (Spring 2014): 11.

[163] Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 16.

around us; to enter into a "flow state," marked by an intensified spacio-temporal awareness. It takes time; walking is durational.[164]

For Vancouver-based writer, artist and educator Randy Lee Cutler, "walking thus becomes part of a generative cycle of assimilating and absorbing the world around us, taking (without taking) things in with all of the sustenance this process entails; each of us has our own rhythms, ways of moving and responding to the world around us."[165] Walking with others furthers this rhythmic attunement, necessitating that bodies move together and develop a shared attention to a site, the act of walking, and the surrounding conditions. Walking with artists as a way of tending to the storied place of the Lower Don River became an embodied practice of negotiation. This negotiation between myself as curator, artists and site was necessary to embrace the flow of the landscape, my collaborator's pace, and thinking. Negotiation became the driving force in each encounter.

For Solnit, "walking is the only way to measure the rhythm of the body against the rhythm of the land."[166] "Expanding our sensuous intellect" through walking allows for an attunement to the Land as an "artifact of intelligence."[167] "Place provides a template for practice," thus that we may engage in walking and thinking to shake up the frame of what we might presume to know about a specific place, its history and geography.[168] As French cultural critic Michel de Certeau writes, "in a pre-established geography…everyday stories tell us what one can do in it and make out of it…," the story, "opens a legitimate *theatre* for practical *actions*. It creates a field that authorizes dangerous and contingent social actions."[169] The social action of walking and its storying possibilities allow for the production of thought and understanding that would otherwise be inaccessible.

The possibilities of walking together to allow for collective experience to emerge has been critiqued by participatory artist Simon Pope, citing anthropologists Tim Ingold and Jo Lee, who recognizes that "walking in close proximity does not necessarily admit the researcher into others' lives."[170] We cannot assume that collective walking will create the conditions for meaningful exchange. For Ingold and Lee, "to participate is

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[164] Cutler, "On speculative walking," 12.
[165] Cutler, 13.
[166] Solnit in Lippard, *Lure of the Local*, 17.
[167] Lippard, *Lure of the Local*, 16.
[168] Tim Cresswell in Tuck and McKenzie, *Place in Research*, 34.
[169] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 122, 125.
[170] Simon Pope, "Walking transformed: The dialogics of art and walking," *C Magazine* 121 (Spring 2014), 17.

not to walk *into* but to walk *with*—where 'with' implies not a face-to-face confrontation, but heading the same way, sharing the same vistas, and perhaps retreating from the same threats behind."[171] Walking with, as a side-by-side mode of encounter between bodies and place, becomes a "means to negotiate flow" in the movement of bodies, the traversing of space and the contouring of a conversation.[172] Walking alongside "becomes symbolic of an ideal type of relation, where moving together, shoulder-to-shoulder, conveys the potential for *mutuality*, *parity* or *equality*."[173]

Walking together, as a research-creation activity allied to the curatorial, may also be understood through the work of Amish Morrell and Diane Borsato's *Outdoor School*. While this ongoing work—that has been recently published as a book, *Outdoor School*—may not be easily categorized as a 'curated exhibition(s),' the curatorial tendencies within their collaborative walks, forays, swims, apple picking and bee-keeping activities offer thoughtful propositions for thinking and working with Land in socially-engaged, decolonial and pedagogical ways. Within the various Outdoor Schools staged in Banff, Alberta, Scarborough, Ontario, and with the Doris McCarthy Gallery—and Morrell and Borsato's larger bodies of work—learning is foregrounded. Some of their methods for staging encounters with the outdoors have been developed through participating in and leading mushroom forays. Places become potentials for pedagogy in which adventure and curiosity are the tools of engagement.[174] For over 10 years, their curated foray events bring together established mushroomers, artists, experts and local residents who come with and share diverse knowledges, thus taking "intellectual and creative practices back to the land."[175]

Much of their work is informed by decolonial modes of teaching both within and outside of the university institution. Describing a "seminar-in-the-forest" which Morrell and Borsato staged as a section of a hike along the length of the Bruce trail—which follows the Niagara Escarpment for almost nine hundred kilometres across Southern Ontario—curated by artists Tamira Sawatzky and Elle Flanders, Morrell notes "our abilities to sense, empathize and imagine are very different when we are outside."[176]

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[171] Tim Ingold and Jo Lee, "Fieldwork on Foot: Perceiving, Routing, Socializing," in *Locating the Field: Space Place and Context in Anthropology*, eds. Simon Coleman and Peter Collins (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006), 67.
[172] Pope, "Walking transformed," 19.
[173] Pope, 19.
[174] Diane Borsato, "The Best Dancer is Also a Farmer: A Conversation around Art, Life and Learning," in *Outdoor School: Contemporary Environmental Art*, ed. Amish Morrell and Diane Borsato (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2021), 51.
[175] Morrell, "The Best Dancer," 52.
[176] Morrell, 52.

During this "seminar-in-the-forest," a group of about 30 people gathered to walk a ten-kilometre portion of the trail just outside Toronto. During the event, participants read several poems by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, trekked a section of the Bruce Trail, experienced a tour of a reconstructed Iroquoian village, were pestered by flies, felt the cool shade of trees, and listened to the rustle of leaves, creating the conditions "to listen more deeply with our imaginations and our bodies, and with greater empathy and responsibility. We learn and think differently when we are outside, and as sound ecologists remind us, we experience space acoustically and are able to hear farther outdoors."[177]

Responding to the site through participatory engagement and fieldwork, and with my collaborators, to cite Morrell, we can "rekindle our relationship to the land and find a new common ground for kinship with one another."[178] Doing research and learning outdoors is complicated by a history of colonialism here in Canada. Much of 'outdoor culture' has become synonymous with whiteness and frontier fantasies and has been shaped by the branding and commercialization of leisure culture.[179] To avoid reinforcing these tendencies, I remain aware of how outdoor culture has been heavily determined by European concepts of land ownership and class aspirations[180] and the problems of social inequality and systemic racism have made access to the outdoors unsafe, limited or impossible for many.

Describing their research-creation event, *Stone Walks on the Bruce Trail: Queering the Trail*, Springgay and Truman take up a critical approach to walking that decenters dominant narratives of walking in nature as imbricated in issues of "environmentalism, sustainability and conservation."[181] This narrative maintains a separation between nature and culture, framing sustainability as a process of systems management and technological fixes.[182] This framing makes walkers spectators who are external to entanglements with geosocial and Indigenous Land.[183] The distinction between nature and culture, specifically a separation between the Don River and the urbanized landscape of Downtown Toronto, privileges settler views and values. Walkers can

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[177] Morrell, "The Best Dancer," 52.
[178] Amish Morrell, "We Always Begin with an Acknowledgement of the Land," in *Outdoor School: Contemporary Environmental Art*, ed. Amish Morrell and Diane Borsato (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2021), 20.
[179] Morrell, "We Always Begin," 21.
[180] Morrell, 21.
[181] Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 17.
[182] For example, the current renaturalization project at the mouth of the Don River and Port Lands, discussed in detail in Chapter 4.
[183] Springgay and Truman, 17.

comfortably move through and leave a landscape they experience as outside observers. Thus, Springgay and Truman assert that "place-based research needs to be put into conversation with Indigenous knowledges, practices that 'unsettle' white settlers," and, they continue, "critical environmental studies need to move place from the periphery of social science research."[184] A study of a place must contend with the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the continued impacts of settler colonialism. Revisiting the Lower Don River, accounting for the "settler colonial histories and ongoing practices of place," my walking research seeks to counter the pitfalls of place-making walks that only lead to "restorying and re-inhabitation."[185]

Springgay and Truman's research-creation event *Stone Walks on the Bruce Trail: Queering the Trail*, "ruptured and queered" the walking trail—challenging a culture of nature walks that privilege settler views and values—by connecting walkers with the "geological forces of place and Indigenous Land-centered knowledges."[186] Their walk contrasts colonial walking practices presented as a method of extractive self-discovery for the walker, in which nature is a backdrop to be "consumed or conquered."[187] Walking along the escarpment of the Bruce Trail, participants were met with pop-up lectures speaking to a critical history of walking; the term queer and its implication for thinking walking practices otherwise; the 450-million-year geological history of the landscape; the trail's vast biodiversity, and stories of humans and nonhumans who have "lived with the land."[188] Springgay and Truman's placed-based research is committed to the 'unsettling' of environmental studies and walking practices. Like this research-creation, they foreground theories of place that prioritize Indigenous and Land-based knowledges.

Walking as a critical aesthetic

With these complexities at the fore, I share a work that, from the outset, inspired this research-creation dissertation's approach to aesthetic practices of walking that are safe, equitable and attendant to the complexities of doing work with the Land in a Canadian (and thus colonial) context. Walking has been a part of curator, artist, and member of Beausoleil First Nation Lisa Myers' practice for many years. Tracing back to her 2009 video installation work, *Walking*, Myers practices walking as a way to connect to her familial history and the horrors of her own Anishinaabe Grandfather's escape from the Shingwauk Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie. In *Walking*, Myers presents an installation of a looped video of feet walking and following cracks in Canadian shield

[184] Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 24.
[185] La Paperson in Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 24.
[186] Springgay and Truman, 25.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid., 26.

bed rock projected onto a canvas screen weighed at the bottom with rusty railway spikes (collected during a 250km walk tracing her Grandfather's journey). Myers documented the journey through writing and photos on a blog which later came to inform her video animation work, *and from then on we lived on blueberries for about a week* (2015). In 2009, Myers travelled the 250-kilometre journey of her Grandfather's escape in 11 days with her cousin Shelley Essaunce and her nephew Gabriel. Myers writes in the exhibition catalogue for *No Visible Horizon* (2016) at the Walter Phillips Gallery, "after this walk I began thinking about how to locate myself within my Grandfather's story and about how I wanted to convey its different iterations. One thing that struck me was that he survived by eating blueberries growing along the tracks. He said, 'and from then on we lived on blueberries for about a week.'"[189] This quotation later became the title for her video animation that presents morphing images of berries on wooden spoons. The animation depicts images of landforms and waterways through the staining of blueberries on wooden spoons, offering a gestural depiction of her Grandfather's journey through the food that sustained him along the way. The spoons represent sharing and gathering, while the abstracted topography formed by the berries traces a line of consumption punctuating her Grandfather's journey.

Myers's practice is dependent on embodied encounters with the Land. She used a recorded conversation with her Grandfather from the 1990s to retrace his journey. For her, walking was a way to find herself within his story and then bring the places in his account to life:

> When I recall walking across the railway bridge over the Mississauga River north of Lake Huron […] I think about my fear of the elevation, and how gusts of wind unsteadied my steps. Finding my footing meant looking down and seeing the river rushing 50 feet below the railway ties of that century-old steel bridge. The Mississagi River flows into Lake Huron, the railway crosses the river, and from my Grandfather's account of his journey, this was the first place (after leaving school) where he heard his language and saw Anishinaabe people cooking and sharing food down by the river. They welcomed him, and fed him.[190]

Following this practice of walking to connect to Land, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson tells a traditional Nishnaabeg

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[189] Lisa Myers, "Rails and Ties," *No Visible Horizon* (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 2016).
[190] Lisa Myers in Leah Sandals, "Step by Step: Artists Walk to Resist Colonization, Abelism and More," Canadian Art, last modified June 22, 2017, https://canadianart.ca/features/step-step-artists-walk-resist-colonization-ableism/.

story of maple syrup in her paper *Land as Pedagogy*. Simpson shares Nishnaabeg intelligences and ways of coming to know that are not accepted or valued within colonial institutions or modes of education.[191] There is no standardized curriculum, legitimation, or valuation based on colonial education systems. Indigenous intellectual systems (and the context in which they operate) actively assert and protect Indigenous Land as a source of knowledge. In the story, a young girl comes to learn from the Land through observation, theorization and the care and encouragement of her elders. Simpson tells us that "the radical thinking and action of this story is not so much in the mechanics of reducing maple sap to sugar, it lies in the reproduction of a loving web of Nishnaabeg networks within which learning takes place."[192] In this vein, Myers attends to her Grandfather's Land-based knowledge and comes to her learning from the storied path she traverses as a way to find her footing. Simpson urges, "if you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the Land and do it. Get a practice."[193] Simpson's understanding of Land as pedagogy, wherein Land is "both context and process," breaks from institutionalized learning practices that (re)produce settler colonialism and capitalism.[194] For Springgay and Truman, in Simpson's pedagogical model, Land is not a background, but rather it steeps a web of relations between humans and more-than-human beings.[195]

Learning from the Land

Simpson argues that learning comes through Land; thus, as a settler-curator committed to unsettling colonial practices of walking research, I *tune in*[196] to the Land rather than seeking to capture or methodically document. On early walks along the Lower Don River, I allowed myself to be caught up by curiosity; being in the landscape allowed me to learn and unlearn the history of this place. Finding myself in the middle of already-on-their-way relations in the Lower Don River and Valley landscape, I was able to take up an unsettling approach to walking-with as described in the research-creation work of Springgay and Truman. Unsettling destabilizes what has come before—colonial, capitalist, racist research methods—to interrogate the inheritance of research practices

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[191] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 1-25.

[192] Simpson, *Land as Pedagogy*, 9.

[193] Simpson, 18.

[194] Ibid., 9.

[195] Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 28.

[196] Following Anthropologist Natasha Myers' walking and photographic practices in the Oak Savannah of Toronto's High Park, I borrow her concept of *tuning in*. Myers describes her research-creation practice of tending to the Oak Savannah as cultivating "*modes of attention* that might help *tune in* to the deep time of these lands and the *naturalcultural happenings* shaping its present." Natasha Myers, "Becoming sensor in sentient worlds: A more-than-natural history of a black oak savannah," in *Anthropology of the Arts*, ed. Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 2.

(for Springgay and Truman, the practice of walking in particular), "to agitate, and to arouse different ethical and political concerns."[197] An unsettling approach to research is allied to research-creation's valuation of knowledge-making that is not easily quantifiable within normative institutional (colonial) framing. Manning asserts that research-creation as 'study' can open unto what Moten and Harney conceptualize as the undercommons. She proposes that research-creation's minor gesture "creates the conditions for new ways of encountering study—forms and forces of intellectuality that cut across normative accounts of what it means to know."[198]

The undercommons is not a defined place; it is within the underground, "the downlow low-down maroon community," "where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted."[199] In the undercommons, knowledge is not assumed to have an existing form; it refuses containment within traditional academic discourses. It disrupts the university's institutional(izing) system, which is bound to capitalist and colonial notions of the encapsulation and commodification of knowledge. Entering the undercommons of the university, "is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, the matricidal, queer."[200] For Manning, "the call made by the undercommons is that we refrain from taking on problems that are already recognizable, available, but work instead, collectively, to invent open problems that bring us together in the mode of active inquiry."[201] Different kinds of attention can emerge when we unsettle the university institution's established (commodifiable) questions. The transversality of research-creation's hyphenated thinking and making allows for attunement to the journey of thought itself.

Continuing on the journey of this research-creation's unfolding, during the remainder of the summer of 2018—after completing the 'doctoral forum'—I paused work on my dissertation to focus on two other curatorial projects; first, a co-curated group exhibition *Femynynytees* at AVE, Montreal, which opened in summer 2018 and a curated showcase of research-creation at Milieux Institute titled *sights of feeling* which opened in October 2018. The Curatorial Research-Creation Collective (CRCC) was also in the early stages of developing our collective thought. We held a research visit to Toronto in April 2018, during which we interviewed curators Emelie Chhangur (then AGYU), Ana Barajas (YYZ), and Josh Vettivelu (then Whippersnapper). Shortly after we prepared for a conference presentation of our research on curation as research-creation at UAAC-AAUC Conference in October 2018.

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[197] Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 15.
[198] Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 27.
[199] Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 26.
[200] Moten and Harney, 26.
[201] Manning, 10.

2019

I returned to my dissertation proposal during the Winter 2019 semester with a richness cultivated while working on other curatorial and research-creation projects over the past few months. Preparing for my proposal defence, I visited the Don River in March 2019 and contacted my first artist collaborator Danica Evering in April 2019. I met Danica in 2016 while working as a research assistant for Dr. Matt Soar on the Montreal Signs Project. Danica had been working with Matt on an exhibition project oriented around two salvaged split-flap Solari signs recovered from the defunct Mirabel Airport, Montreal. The exhibition, *YMX: Migration, Land, and Loss after Mirabel* (2017), was an immersive display including the two Solari signs, programmed to cycle through a series of words (written by artist Cheryl Sim) in conversation with one another; a labyrinth of stanchions; a baggage sign (also salvaged from Mirabel); a video work by artist Cheryl Sim featuring archival footage of Mirabel and interviews with Pierre Nepveu, Prem Sooriyakumar and Kim Thuy who share personal stories of their experiences at Mirabel; as well as other artifacts that speak to the airport's complicated history related to Land, movement, colonialism and memory.

Danica and Matt curated the exhibition, and I acted as the coordinator responsible for some components of exhibition design and archival research. Through the curatorial process, Danica and I also became great friends. At the time, Danica was completing her MA in Media Studies at Concordia. Her thesis, *Impostering: Complicating Power in Social Practice* (2017), looked at socially engaged art practices—as inherently imposter practices that reach out into communities, institutions and other disciplines—and the difficulties in situating oneself (and one's practice) between insider and outsider through relations of power, position and place. Working with Danica, I was struck by her commitment to fostering deep relationships with sites and things, such as the landscape of Mirabel and, in particular, the Solari split-flap signs, which she came to know in and out, attuned to every odd sound or stutter. I was particularly interested in Danica's critical movements between the roles of artist, curator, and writer via her self-reflexive practice, as well as her gorgeous prose in various soundwalks and, in particular, a poem written for Althea Thauberger's *L'arbre est dans ses fauilles [The Three Is in Its Leaves]* (2017) for *In Search of Expo 67,* (2017) at the Musée d'art Contemporain de Montréal.[202]

In the summer months before Danica and I took our first walk along the Don River, the Curatorial Research-Creation Collective organized a field trip to the Carleton University Art Gallery to see Marlene Creates' retrospective solo exhibition *Places, Paths and Pauses* (2019). An example of the tendencies toward Land that inform this dissertation can be illustrated through Creates' photographic, sculptural and mark-making practices.

[202] *In Search of Expo 67* was curated by Dr. Monika Gagnon and Lesley Johnstone.

Creates' work tends to the specificities of Newfoundland's Blast Hole Pond Road in Portugal Cove, where she has lived and worked since 2002. The six acres of boreal forest have formed and informed her principal artistic venture, "paying close attention to one particular place."[203] Creates' series of 59 photo/landworks *Paper, Stones and Water* (1979-1985) offer a counterpoint to the large-scale earthworks of the 1960s and 1970s, which she directly challenges through her practice. *Stones, England* (1980), as with the rest of this series, is based upon Creates' response to place as a visitor. The images present an archive of the 'fragile moments' of encounters between Creates, stones, and tide. In this series, the artist would choreograph an arrangement of stones—through an embodied and site-specific performance presenting an aesthetic visual ordering. In the case of *Stones, England*, a sharp horizontal line of small crisp white stones laid over a mass of smooth, cool large black stones, an order that would not be found naturally. While her imposition is mediated, the natural rhythms of this imposition are fleeting and 'slight.' The incoming tide will render Creates' performative ordering a memory, existing only in photographic documentation of an encounter between the artist, stones and tide. As Creates describes, "nature is never finished," and her practice is suggestive of this infinite temporality that stretches back and forth in time and into which the artist offers up "a kind of overlaying of a fragile moment on an enormous natural and historical past."[204] Though Creates' work is phenomenological—relying on her personal experiences with the site, which differs from the ontological and process-driven work of curation as research-creation as it is framed and enacted within this dissertation—it remains an illustrative example of Land-based work that engenders careful relations between site, human (artist, curator), and an entire network of agencies that feed an event's coming into being[205].

Danica and I took our first walk along the Lower Don River and Valley on October 5, 2019. On this visit, we met at the top of *The Narrows*—the straightened section of the Lower Don River from the Riverdale Park Viaduct south to the Keating Channel—and walked north toward the Prince Edward Viaduct and Duane Linklater's *Monsters for Beauty, Permanence and Individuality* (2017), an installation along the Lower Don Trail of 14 cast concrete gargoyle sculptures which are replicas of gargoyles adorning prominent buildings in downtown Toronto. Linklater's project is a critical intervention into the history of the Lower Don River and the many structural changes that have occurred at this site in the interest of developing colonial Toronto; looking specifically to the

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[203] Marlene Creates, "Marlene Creates on her work," in *Marlene Creates: Places, Paths and Pauses*, ed. Susan Gibson Garvey and Andrea Kunard (Fredericton: Beaverbrook Art Gallery, 2017), 13.
[204] Marlene Creates, "A Hand to Standing Stones, Scotland 1983," in *Marlene Creates: Places, Paths and Pauses*, ed. Susan Gibson Garvey and Andrea Kunard (Fredericton: Beaverbrook Art Gallery, 2017), 50.
[205] At the time, I was unaware that this work would share so many affinities with Shelby Lisk's video diptych *All that remains*.

gargoyle as a symbol of power and authority that is employed in certain types of colonial spaces. Danica and I discussed Linklater's intervention, the contours of the nascent exhibition, the Don Improvement, and Katheryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), which I was reading at the time.

In the vein of this dissertation's approach to environmental history, Yusoff's writing disrupts humanist history's development of the Anthropocene as a concept suggesting that we are *geosocial* in that we are all intertwined with geology. She means that the geological and social are knotted together and that humans are thus composed of inhuman forces of Earth.[206] Her approach is decolonial and anti-racist, guiding the early foundations of my research and conceptualization of the Don River's history, particularly the Don Improvement Plan. Yusoff proposes that *black poetics* can redirect the "racial logics of extraction through new energetic modes and understandings of relation, desedimenting the forms of inhuman historicity that are established through colonialism."[207] Springgay and Truman cite Yusoff, suggesting that walking studies consider "how human bodies and geological bodies are co-composed."[208] Walking the Lower Don River and Valley and considering the impacts of a 300-year history of colonial development, I was encouraged to think much more expansively, considering the precolonial landscape back to prehistoric.

The Lower Don River and Valley was once part of the prehistoric proglacial Lake Iroquois. Even earlier in the Pleistocene epoch, the Laurentide Glacier covered present-day Toronto and helped shape the hills and valleys we know.[209] In *What Water Knows*, an entry in the Toronto Biennial's exhibition book *Water, Kinship, Belief: Toronto Biennial of Art 2019-2022*, Kate Lawson suggests that "regardless of the scale of time (human or geologic), the story of how a place changes can be read through the constitutive elements of an environment," an ecology of relations.[210] Learning through walking the Don River reminded me that we are all connected, humans and more-than-humans, through the cyclical movements of water.

During my October 2019 visit to Toronto, I attended Nuit Blanche and the first Toronto Biennial: *The Shoreline Dilemma*. While walking through Riverdale Park heading towards the Don River I encountered, by chance, Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves's *Phantom*

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[206] Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 19.
[207] Yusoff, 19.
[208] Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 17.
[209] Katie Lawson, "What Water Knows," in *Water, Kinship, Belief: Toronto Biennial of Art 2019-2022*, ed. Candice Hopkins, Katie Lawson and Tairone Bastien (Toronto: co-published by the Toronto Biennial of Art and Art Metropole, 2022), 114.
[210] Lawson, "What Water Knows," 115.

Pain (2019) while on a second site visit (fig. 8). Entering Riverdale Park from the west side, I noticed one of the familiar signs indicating work in the Toronto Biennial. I noticed the shining steel of Alves's site-specific installation, peeking out of the grass just off of the pedestrian pathway that leads down into the park and towards the Riverdale Park Viaduct. Alves's *Phantom Pain* is an installation of 5 steel segments embedded into the grassy park floor measuring 6.5 x 3.5 meters. The steel sculpture traces a section of the former curving path of the Don River before the Improvement Project channelized the river that once flowed across what is now Riverdale Park West. Alves's work often speaks to lost and altered rivers, thereby placing into relief the complicated and often buried histories of Toronto's waters. The Lower Don River continues to inspire creative interventions contending with its colonial 'improvements.'

Figure 8

Maria Thereza Alves's *Phantom Pain* at Riverdale Park West, October 2019.

A few weeks after my visit to Toronto, Danica and I travelled to the UAAC conference in Quebec City, where she presented on a panel, *Little Gestures for the Epoch: Public Art in the Age of the Anthropocene*, which I co-organized. Danica shared her work *Rock Turns into Sand: Working in Relation to the Local*, a performative presentation of poetry and

images that suggested a critical and personally-invested inquiry into local artistic resistances—primarily tied to the gentrification of post-industrial cities such as Hamilton and Toronto—grounded in the politics of place. The collective thought developed through this meeting would inform some of the problematics of the final exhibition as a public work that must resist the pitfalls of creative production that further gentrification processes. I spent the next two months of 2019 co-organizing a field school with the Curatorial-Research Creation Collective named *Transitions*. The four-day field-intensive was developed in conversation with *La Station* (1969), the decommissioned Nun's Island gas station designed by Mies van Der Rohe which had recently been converted into an intergenerational community center (2011). Tending to the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus and its radical pedagogical impulse, the intensive looked to the affinities between the Bauhaus and research-creation to find methods for creating speculative futures for the carbon-oriented design of the Island.

The 'curatorial' as an emergent process

Drawing on a legacy of earlier Canadian site-specific curatorial projects, I continued to expand my definition of curation as research-creation. The emergence of *Transitions* through *La Station*, as both a container and inspiration for the field school—and the process of working with a collective—further developed my site-specific curatorial practice. In *The Lure of the Local*, Lippard advocates for an exhibitionary practice that "does not enshrine the past in a palatable cocoon but functions as a social catalyst."[211] Curating is a creative endeavour that is pregnant with the potential to challenge existing conditions, catalyzing new futures. The curatorial may propose new worlds that, in the instance of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* directly confront the myths of settler colonial progress to reassert the role of this Land and its history anew. Though I say this with an acknowledgment of, and direct opposition to, those curatorial processes that foreground the curator as a creative genius or manipulator of work to new ends.

Maria Lind suggests that 'curating' differs from 'the curatorial' in that the former is a business-as-usual form of organizing, commissioning and programming an exhibition. At the same time, the latter "goes further, implying a methodology that takes art as its starting point, but then situates it in relation to specific contexts, times and questions in order to challenge the status quo."[212] Lind suggests that the curatorial may be enacted from various positions "such as that of curator, an editor, an educator, a communications person and so on. This means that the curatorial can be employed […]

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[211] Lippard, *Lure of the Local*, 37.

[212] Maria Lind "To Show or Not to Show," Mousse Magazine 31, last modified December 1, 2011. https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/jens-hoffmann-maria-lind-2011/.

by people in a number of different capacities in the ecosystem of art."[213] In developing a distinction between 'curating' and 'the curatorial,' Lind is proposing a practice more oriented to the non-hierarchical, casting away the figure of the singular curatorial master or genius in favour of a curatorial model wherein the curatorial is a process of culturing multiple and diverse agencies and agents. The curatorial "create[s] structures and processes by which different rhythms of being and doing can act responsively towards each other."[214] This rhythmic approach to the curatorial carries with it a potential for change.

This change-making potential is also evident in the work of Emelie Chhangur, Director and Curator of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, and a leading voice in experimental curatorial practices of institutional transformation, who has been developing her practice of 'in-reach' for over 20 years in Canada. 'In-reach' is a process of institutional transformation that she names in contradistinction to outreach "because the differing ecologies of knowledge that these kinds of projects produce change institutional practices from *within* by introducing different social economies, cultural protocols, and perspectives in ways that the institution can neither suppress nor ignore if they wish to see the project through."[215] 'In-reach' transforms the exhibitionary institution and the role of 'the curator,' "incorporating different kinds of cultural and aesthetic influences, different forms of social organization and economies, and differing cultural contexts and forms of expression."[216]

In an online text accompanying her doctoral thesis exhibition at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery titled *(A rehearsal for) Objects Lie on a Table* (2018) Chhangur finds an affinity with the work of German art historian and world-renowned curator Beatrice von Bismarck. Chhangur finds purchase in von Bismarck's framing of the exhibition as a constellation of objects, entities and subjects steeped in their histories that become assemblages and assemblies in their coming into relation. Chhangur's thesis exhibition engages dramaturgy as a curatorial technique through the creation of performative didactic texts. Taking up Gertrude Stein's 1922 play *Objects Lie on a Table* as a performative didactic, Chhangur sets the stage for her curated exhibition. By reproducing Stein's text

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[213] Lind, "To Show," online.
[214] Raqs Media Collective, "Earthworms Dancing: Notes for a Biennial in Slow Motion," E-flux Journal 7, last modified June 2009. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/07/61387/earthworms-dancing-notes-for-a-biennial-in-slow-motion/.
[215] Emilie Chhangur, "In-reach and the Fabulatory Function of the Curatorial," *C Magazine* 149 (August 2021): 31.
[216] Emilie Chhangur, "What Can Contemporary Art Perform? And Then Transgress?" in *Curating Live Arts: Critical Perspectives, Essays, and Conversations on Theory and Practice*, ed. Dena Davida, et al. (New York: Berghahn Books Incorporated, 2018), 365.

as the exhibition's 'didactic,' which viewers first encounter before entering the exhibition, Chhangur sets up a 'live dramaturgy' by asking viewers to engage with a script as an entry point rather than a formal and prescriptive traditional exhibitionary didactic. Thinking about the exhibition didactic outside of normative constraints—the didactic as an interpretive and educational text which frames the exhibition for viewers, outlining a particular pathway for audiences to engage with the exhibition—the accompanying text(s) which are woven throughout *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* are inspired by Chhangur's structural unmooring of the curatorial convention. Taking up a performative approach (dramaturgy), my exhibition engages the curatorial text otherwise, imagining it as an unfolding process that guides the viewer rather than outlining a particular reading. The curatorial text is not just written; it comprises edited archival images, maps and texts that co-compose the exhibition alongside the audio and video works.

Dramaturgy is a compositional activity that structures through the performance itself rather than following a prescribed meaning. For Peter Reder, cited by Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, "dramaturgy temporalizes events" such that "a process that leads to a structure that orders sense and thus enables encoding/decoding of meaning."[217] Like research-creation in the vein of Manning and Massumi, "dramaturgy is visualizing and embodying by performing the structure itself; it emancipates itself from an idea on paper by placing the idea into time and space."[218] The curatorial process of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* was so bound to the specificities of its temporal unfolding, and thus the curatorial text should embody that same dramaturgical sense. The curatorial text is a patchwork woven together, reflecting the process of this exhibition's coming into being.

Dramaturgical work is "an art form, not a science" that is led by process rather than a formula.[219] The performative nature of this exhibition's coming-into-being, its variability (inherent in its location online) and its affinities with Chhangur's approach to the performative didactic are allied to the dramaturgical. Dramaturgy, like curating, is a process of uncovering or developing the necessary presentational format for the concept(s) being researched and presented.[220] In the case of this research-creation, that meant rethinking the exhibitionary format/platform and upending my approach to the 'curatorial text.' According to Chhangur, dramaturgy as a curatorial method "means a process of thinking *approaches* to composition, and, in fact, *inventing* new forms through

[217] Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 4.
[218] Reder in Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy*, 4.
[219] Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy*, 4.
[220] Turner and Behrndt, 26.

new approaches to thinking."[221] Curating *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* required the constant development of new approaches to researching and creating during the ever-shifting conditions of a global pandemic and the invention of new forms of exhibition making which traversed site-specific formulations to multiple iterations of an online curatorial expression of the exhibition.

Channgur's process is also relevant to a curatorial approach to public space—particularly within the context of place's multiple and contested histories that necessitate a transversal approach to making, thinking and collaborating with artists and site—in which the institution of curatorial practice itself requires new methods of attunement, collaboration and exchange.[222] Within this model of an exhibition as a constellation, the curator is one actant in a dynamic set of relations, with the curator presenting just one part of such complexity. Chhangur advocates for the work of von Bismarck as she "challenges curators to think beyond the end-goals of display and to erode any residual boundaries between subjects and objects as constituted through the modern period. Curators are operating within the constellation as part of the collective."[223]

An example of a complex constellation of relations—which also follows this research-creation's approach to the curatorial as a slow process—necessary for in-reach's emergence as a process can be read through Chhangur's three-year project titled *The Awakening/ Giigozhkozimin* in Ojibway. The project, orchestrated by Chhangur in collaboration with Panamanian artist Humberto Vélez for the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU), brought together two divergent groups of individuals: members of the Mississaguas of the New Credit First Nation and a group of young Parkour athletes from the Greater Toronto Area in a collaborative performance staged at the Art Gallery of Ontario in May 2011. Over three years, *The Awakening* was born out of a series of "gatherings, feasts, workshops and organically developed skill-sharing sessions (…) which took place on the New Credit Reserve and at the Parkour Gym in downtown Toronto."[224] The collaborative performance materialized through rehearsal and exchange, which began by fostering trust between all groups involved. Chhangur credits the difficult moments of translation, institutional barriers, and trust building as the "real work" of "working through" *The Awakening*.[225] These crucial moments of the

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[221] Emilie Chhangur, "Rehearsals for Curating Reversals," Curating in the Continuous Present: A Rehearsal for Gertrude Stein's Objects Lie on A Table, last modified February 22, 2017. https://scalar.usc.edu/works/curating-in-the-continuous-present-a-rehearsal-for-gertrude-steins-objects-lie-on-a-table/rehearsals-for-curating-reversals.
[222] Chhangur, "Rehearsals for Curating Reversals," online.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Chhangur, "What Can Contemporary Art Perform," 364.
[225] Chhangur, 364.

processes' complicated trajectory—and subsequent challenges and negotiations—were, for Chhangur and all her collaborators, so often the moments "where new ideas emerged or became instances that allowed for meaning exchange to happen."[226]

A meandering flow and permeability within the curatorial process created the conditions for "outside influences to seep into the project's development, creating as well the possibility of addressing the notion of cultural complexity itself as a subject and as a strategy."[227] Chhangur suggests that this process of working with—if not encouraging—incongruences and cultural differences steeps an exchange in meaningful complexities. Subsequently, such a process allows for institutional transformation, and I argue this applies to not only the institution of the gallery/museum but also the institutions of contemporary art and curatorial practice. For Chhangur, "curatorial practice is not designed to further the disciplinary knowledge of contemporary art, but rather to engage in different historical, social, and culturally submerged practices, and to work in relation to them, making sure that local knowledge, cultural protocols, and ethics not only inform the shape the project takes, but also the future practices of the gallery itself and the ways in which the individuals inside it work."[228]

The Awakening incorporated Indigenous worldviews, protocols and processes into the gallery, a colonial institution, to propose "how cultural traditions are enacted not just staged."[229] The performance was held in the AGO's Walker Court, beginning in a procession outside leading to the front doors of the institution, where Philip Cote (of the Tecumseh Collective) blessed everyone with sweet grass. Chhangur describes, "inside, an Indigenous Elder in full regalia, lighting a smudge pot, smoke rising upward in Walker Court, the smell of sweet grass filling the galleries, was an equally uncommon sensory and olfactory experience that disrupted the usual serenity of the AGO."[230] A coming together of traditions within the institution is one that presents so many barriers—we can only imagine the negotiations that took place to enable a ceremonial burning of sweet grass in the AGO's specialized (climate) controlled environment—staged a performance of ceremony and parkour that would "reach out to the spirits."[231] Ceremony and parkour also intertwined with Frank Gehry's massive snaking spiral staircase that towers over Walker Court.

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[226] Chhangur, "What Can Contemporary Art Perform," 365.
[227] Chhangur, 365.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid., 366.
[230] Ibid., 368.
[231] Ibid., 369.

Chhangur describes the energy after the performance as the audience was invited to join the circle of drumming and dancing; "everyone poured into Walker Court, almost trampling one another in their enthusiasm to participate in this unique celebration."[232] About fifteen minutes later, to a thrum of energetic dancing, crying, and celebration, AGO staff announced (over a loudspeaker) the event's end and asked everyone to leave. But, as Chhangur recounts, no one left, "all the participants were so proud (…) *The Awakening* struck an important emotional chord with Torontonians. It reminded them again of who we are as Canadians, a mix of so many different people, places, and traditions that are present across time as is marked by our current historical moment. Full of people from all different cultural backgrounds, ages, and abilities, dancing, drumming, and singing together that day, the spirit in Walker Court would never be the same."[233]

The Awakening celebrated cultural diversity in a way that was neither symbolic nor posturing. Chhangur's curatorial process created the conditions for actual collaborative exchange founded on trust and care for one another. The performance created an instance of self-representation for The Mississaugas, who "were tired of always only belonging in the historical section of museums and being kept in the past by ethnographers and anthropologists" while carefully fostering an opportunity (within the gallery institution) to bridge communities and define "national identities not as authoritative representations but as an emergent moment."[234] Performance becomes a locus for the transformation of the colonial art institution, as Chhangur asserts; "if *within* the art institution you change the frame and the participants, then you can change what a culture sees of itself—and can start to change power structures outside the art institution as well […] to speak truth to power from inside art institutions makes those institutions vehicles for changing public discourse. The art gallery is not a reflection; it refracts."[235]

Referencing *The Awakening*, Chhangur acknowledges the transformative potential of taking time and valuing a curatorial process through which "problems could be vehicles to access what lay beyond the boundaries."[236] Slowness, advocated by Chhangur and New Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective (Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta), allows for the attunement to subtleties and the curator to create space for adaptability and to stay open to a process that may veer off course. A

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[232] Chhangur, "What Can Contemporary Art Perform," 369.
[233] Chhangur, 370.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Chhangur, "In-reach," 31.
[236] Emilie Chhangur, "What Can Contemporary Art Perform?: And Then Transgress," *Canadian Theatre Review* 162 (Spring 2015): 83.

curatorial approach that is lead not by a commitment to a specific timeline or pace but by process itself is attuned to research-creation. Following the slow meander of an exhibition's unfolding, rather than setting out strict contours in advance of the work's coming into being, is a technique of curation as research-creation. According to Australian art historian and critic Terry Smith, "while many curators still envisage one (ideal?) viewer's pathway, others prioritize a number of possible routes for that viewer, or the passaging of a number of viewers, moving in parallel or in concert."[237] The practical conditions of exhibition-making are often those immovable contingencies that require the curator to bend meaning or intention to make do with the sliding scale of spatial, budgetary and resource capacities. These projected pathways for meaning-making emerge through the curatorial process and may be shifted in the exhibition's planning, mounting, and conditions. But what if, instead of quickly trying to create accommodations, curators were allowed to work slowly and to meander along a curatorial process as it unfolds within the shifting conditions of its time? Taking time as Chhangur, Raqs and myself have practiced allows for richness in the process, opening up to new knowledge and potentials as an exhibition unfolds across time. In *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* Paula Marincola argues that "questions of practice place its emphasis on and asserts the value of how concepts surrounding curating are filtered through lessons derived from repeated performance, from thinking *and* doing, or perhaps more accurately, thinking based on doing."[238] While this practice of thought and creation is not reserved for curators, it does present affinities with research-creation's process-led approach, insinuating that curation and research-creation maybe have been bedfellows all along.

The exhibition as curatorial materialization

Following the curatorial as a process-led practice allied to research-creation, the exhibition is the space (virtual or physical) where those processes materialize. Curating is a processual endeavour. Its processes may take multiple forms, from the pragmatics of grant applications, acquisition of permits, developing contractual agreements, building or setting up infrastructures to the more creative work of collaborating with artists, developing thematics and exhibitionary statements and the in-act of installing the work(s). Within a most normative performance of exhibition-making, the curator takes up a position of mastery over the work, the situation of the exhibition, and the presentation, to proclaim value for themselves, their institution and the artist(s) and work(s). While this is not always the form and character of the curatorial, it is, within the reigning institutions of art, the most widely practiced. However, the conditions of this research-creation exhibition's unfolding through the uncertainties of a global

[237] Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 36.
[238] Paula Marincola in Smith, *Thinking*, 37.

pandemic and necessary movement to an online exhibition—in which visitors' engagement is much less controllable than a physical gallery (more on that in Chapter 4)—have required an openness to change, adaptability and embracing the possibility of multiple and diverse readings of the exhibition.

The curatorial, as a creative and relational practice, is most fully expressed when the final form and arrangement of an exhibition—it's result—is not known in advance. According to Smith, the exhibition shapes spectators' experience.[239] Exhibiting can range in practices from the rehanging or rearranging of an existing collection to various modes of staging an exhibitionary event as performance, sequencing of sites, or coordinating discursive interactions. Within this framework, the curator is tasked with setting out the contours of meaning—bringing things into the fold and axing out others—thus, a spectator's cumulative experience of an exhibition will defer to the curator's intended meaning.[240] However, this process of curating may be limiting, cutting off the potential for multiple readings, experiences, and meanings to emerge. Raqs Media Collective suggests that the exhibition is a space where art meets its public differently through the gathering of different kinds of people with different "dispositions, feelings, information, insights, and experiences," which they bring "to bear upon the work of reading and transacting meanings and effects occasioned by the presence of a body of works of art gathered together."[241] Within this formulation, the curatorial is an interlocutor that stages an encounter between the artist, site, and public to produce "a body of ideas, counterproposals, concepts, affects, annotations, and interpretations" that expand beyond the work of art. Thus, Raqs considers the exhibition "a point of departure, not as the port of arrival."[242]

Curation as research-creation may be new in its categorization and methodological association; however, curators like Raqs Media Collective have been practicing curation as research-creation for decades, founded in 1992 through a desire for 'kinetic contemplation.' 'Raqs,' in several languages, denotes an intensification of awareness and presence attained by whirling or turning. The collective's approach to curatorial practice centers on a process of 'culturing' an exhibition to crystallize new meaning and patterns of signification.[243] They employ metaphor to describe the practice of culturing an exhibition; crystallization, gardening, catalysts, fermentation;

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[239] Smith, *Thinking*, 35.
[240] Smith, 35.
[241] Raqs Media Collective, "To Culture: Curation as an Active Verb," in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, ed. Beatrice Von Bismarck, et al. (New York: Sternberg Press, 2012), 107.
[242] Raqs Media Collective, "To Culture," 107.
[243] Raqs Media Collective, 101.

> To curate actively is to tend the ground, like a gardener would, such that there are enough catalysts and agents around for things to happen to roots and leaves. Sometimes this may mean actively ensuring that agents sneak in and do their thing. That bees meet flowers and pollinate gardens beyond their fences. To be, in other words, an agent for agents. At other times it may just mean ensuring the protocols of entry and access to the space of making are such that catalysts, who are often outsiders, transients and occupants of marginal positions, are at least not actively prevented from making their presence felt.[244]

Raqs' gardening metaphor describes the necessity for a temporality to emerge through the exhibition's development (not imposed upon it from the outset), a transformational quality of the doing of curatorial work and the necessity of multiple agencies to nestle in and foment an exhibition's coming to being.

While not a curated 'exhibition,' the collective's *Sarai* (co-founded in 2000 together with Ravi Sundaram and Ravi Vasudevan as a program of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi) presents an example of the kind of contouring and slow curatorial practice I seek to engage in this research-creation. According to the collective, *Sarai* is a collaborative work of art; "a studio, a seminar, a salon, a laboratory, a playground, an archive, an incubator, a café and a refuge."[245] *Sarai* is both a physical site and a proposal to "embark on audacious journeys in thought and practice" in a highly transdisciplinary manner.[246] The word sarai, or caravansarai, is commonly used in Central Asian and Indian languages to refer to varied types of shelters for travellers punctuating cities and highways across Central Asia. Caravansarai become sites of travel, exchange, adventure, and loci for creating hybrid forms. The collaborative and transdisciplinary work that was born from Raqs' *Sarai* impacted the intellectual and creative scene in Delhi and resulted in the emergence of new forms such as "the graphic novel, media installations, sound art, tactical media forms, experimental public architecture, and collaborations between artists, media practitioners, architects, performers, writers and software programmers" as well as a series of books called the *Sarai Reader Series*.[247]

Enduring over a decade, *Sarai* embodied research-creation's hyphenated thinking and making. Raqs describes the catalyst for their long-term site/proposal, "ours was a wager that the conversation between practices and methods was more important than the

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[244] Raqs Media Collective, "To Culture," 104.
[245] Phillip Monk, "Sarai," in *Raqs Media Collective Casebook*, ed. Michael Miranda (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University Press, 2014), 219.
[246] Monk, "Sarai," 219.
[247] Monk, 220.

soliloquies of any one kind of practice."[248] A subsequent exhibition, *Sarai Reader 09*, at the Devi Art Foundation in Gurgoan, India, embodies the collective's attention to practice through a 'living exhibition' that unfolds over time. Raqs asserts, "the exhibition investigates practice itself. Here, we mean practice in its fullest sense, as an ethic of making, as a mode of living thought."[249] Raqs' ethic of making is allied to the meandering process of this research-creation, which is not tied down to executing a final form but instead flows with the conditions, needs and desires of the curator, artist(s) and site.

Raqs' process-led, context-specific durational work and, in particular, their attention to gardening as a curatorial process of culturing—which follows the conditions are particularities of an instance, a site, a circumstance—finds affinity with Monika Gagnon's notion of 'tender research.' Through tender research, Gagnon considers gardening as an "embodied tending" with a temporal and affective quality.[250] Beginning fieldwork at the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre (NIMC) in Denver, BC (a small-scale community-initiated preservation project at the site of a former WWII Japanese internment camp), Gagnon developed a necessary research approach that would allow her to carefully and appropriately navigate such a "vexed site of collective trauma."[251] Her research project was radically altered when Gagnon arrived in the wake of the death of one of the town's elders who had been forcibly removed to the New Denver internment site in 1942 at the age of 29. Gagnon had "lost her bearings as a researcher through the heavy veil of an elder's death."[252] Unable to record and document such raw moments in the hours and days following a death, Gagnon took to gardening and tending as methods to engage the site of the NIMC and its difficult history.

Gardens—here in the context of the gardens surrounding internment camps which were tended by internees—represent cultural meaning differently. In contrast to history, which is "represented through explicit and expressive modes and narratives," gardens at a heritage site can instead conjure forms of "explanation, chronology, interpretation and display" that trigger "emotion and contemplation."[253] Gagnon's notion of tender research "recognizes and empathizes with these desires while bringing attention to the

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[248] Raqs Media Collective in Chloé Nicolet-dit-Félix and Gulru Vardar "Interview with Raqs Media Collective on the exhibition, Sarai Reader 09," *OnCurating: On Artistic and Curatorial Authorship* 19 (August 22, 2013): 39.
[249] Raqs Media Collective, "Interview with Raqs," 39.
[250] Monika Gagnon, "Tender Research: Field Notes from the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre, New Denver, BC," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31 (2006): 215-225.
[251] Gagnon, "Tender Research," 215.
[252] Gagnon, 219.
[253] Ibid., 222.

idioms and limits of their representation."[254] She describes "a vexed history mar(k)s the site of a small garden plot I am tending."[255]

Gagnon suggests that wild and untended gardens can also cultivate emotions and desires to interpret and contemplate, though they may be "tenuous, rather than tended-to."[256] Referencing the Topography of Terror in the center of Berlin—the former site of the control centers of German National Socialists terror organizations, the Gestapo and the SS, and the Main Office for Reich Security—whose urban green space has been left untended for over 50 years, Gagnon suggests that the site's undecidedness (wildness) is a counterpoint to the "cultivated 'naturalness' that meditative gardens offer in their calculated peacefulness."[257] As a "liminal site" whose memory is presented by a "living landscape that seemed to defy convention and consensus about the atrocities of the Nazi regime," the untended urban garden of the Topography of Terror offers a less defined narrative; a "wild memory."[258] Wandering through urban gardens that bear the horrors of history activates our memories in such a way that other idioms for recollection do not.[259] Embodied memories are activated by ambling and gardening, amongst other methods.[260] Gagnon notes that her pilgrimaging across the NIMC—driving the landscape, walking the site—"produced an explicit idiom of recollection of these civil-rights violations enabled by the invocation of the *War Measures Act*."[261] Memory is held in these gardens and their surrounds; thus, that tender research attends to "the buzzing of its tender plots or the confoundedness created by its silent neglect," which is "worth attending to in its promise of a future."[262]

The affective encounter of embodied experiencing a vexed urban garden holds an awareness of multiple forces, histories and interlocutors that come together to cross-pollinate and cohabit in a place. Working in or with gardens, as *living things*, means entering a field of relations already on its way. Raqs and Gagnon tend to this complexity as a curatorial process and research method, respectively. What emerges for me, in the context of this dissertation, is an approach to research and curatorial practice that *tends* by following the conditions of a particular site and moment (just as Gagnon's research methods shifted through the collective trauma of a death in the community, and the

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[254] Gagnon, "Tender Research," 222.
[255] Ibid., 216.
[256] Ibid., 223.
[257] Ibid.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Ibid.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid.
[262] Ibid., 214.

historical trauma held by the site itself); following the lead of those external and site-specific forces as much as possible (as Raqs slow down their practice and weave deep connections to their collaborative work of art, *Sarai* and the city of Delhi). Like the "liminal site" of the Topography of Terror's wild urban garden in Berlin, the Lower Don River and Valley's landscape rides the cusp between untended natural ecology and highly altered and controlled urban place. The Don is also in limbo, left with the scars and histories of colonial 'improvement'—which have left valley lands heavily polluted and pushed out much of the wildlife that once lived in and moved through the valley—and the horrors of Indigenous genocide layered with plant and animal life (some wild, and some less so), public art, the homeless, the bourgeois walking their pure-bred dogs, the developers and those advocating for the stewardship of the Don River and Valley. Drawing inspiration from gardens by following Raqs' curatorial process of culturing and embrace of slowness and Gagnon's careful, context-led approach to tender research would become essential in the coming months of 2020 as I moved into the new year, unaware of the impending global COVID-19 pandemic.

2020

2020 began with a trip to the UK for two weeks. In February, I returned to Toronto to visit family. On the train travelling back from Toronto to my home in Montreal, scrolling through Facebook, I noticed a friend had posted their apartment for lease from March until September. On a whim, I shared the post with my partner Nolan in Montreal and my Mother in Toronto, and they both quickly came back, encouraging me to pursue the potential move back to Toronto. By February 29, 2020, Nolan and I and all our things were packed into a UHAUL van driving from Montreal to Toronto. In perfect synchronicity, and with no knowledge of my rushed move, I received my first email from Danica (since our visit to Ottawa in October 2019) on March 1, 2020. Danica was checking in and officially confirming her involvement in the project.

In their chapter *To Culture: Curation as an Active Verb*, Raqs Media Collective urges the importance of time in curatorial processes. Making links to the "educational turn" in contemporary art and the multitudinous ways that we may spend time as curators (leisure, learning, breaking), they suggest that time is a place for learning.[263] Processes take hold, and form emerges when the appropriate space has been carved through the duration. For Raqs collective, an exhibition[264] 'in slow motion,' one that follows the "rhythms of life in the place where it is located"[265], allows for an expanded field of

[263] Raqs Media Collective, "To Culture," 102.
[264] In their text Raqs Media Collective refer specifically to the unfolding of a slow-motion biennale, here interpreted as a more general exhibitionary technique.
[265] Raqs Media Collective, "To Culture," 102.

attention. Raqs Media Collective propose;

> The trajectories of moves made during such [an exhibition] could unfold in unforeseen and unpredictable directions, causing processes to grow, mutate, fall back on themselves, hibernate when need be, change course, and proliferate. Such oscillations and transformations can happen without the anxiety of having to rush to premature conclusions…[266]

Following the flows of the meander through a five-month recess from Danica and I's work allowed us to set the conditions for our continued collaboration. Little did we know that my relocation to Toronto would become even more necessary and meaningful in the following weeks.

Pandemic

On March 11, 2020, the NBA suspended the remainder of their basketball season due to the growing concerns and rapidly increasing death count due to COVID-19. That same day the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. The following day, the province of Ontario closed all publically funded schools for two weeks following the March break. March 13, Montreal closed all schools, CEGEP's and universities with the intention to reopen after March 30. March 17, in Ontario, Premier Doug Ford declared an official state of emergency, halting all gatherings of more than 50 people, closing bars and requiring that restaurants offer only takeout or delivery. On the same day, Toronto closed city hall and all civic centers. On March 21, border control measures were implemented between the U.S. and Canada temporarily restricting all non-essential travel. Prior to March 2020 China had the largest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, however, in the second half of the month the U.S. and Italy's numbers began to rapidly increase overtaking China. On March 30, Italy surpassed 10,000 deaths attributed to the virus and two days later in the U.S. New York's official death toll exceeded 1,000.

[266] Raqs Media Collective, "To Culture," 103.

Chapter 3: 'Meander'
A slow journey through the COVID-19 pandemic

A meander is a bend or curve in the flow of a river or other watercourse that is produced by the erosion and deposition of sediments. These curves are commonly found in rivers that traverse sloping ground. They are constantly changing—forming and reforming—and reduce the speed of a river's flow. The meander, a concept inspired by the course of the Don River and woven throughout this research-creation (informing its curatorial techniques), was developed within the uncertainties of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Major shifts and reimaginings have occurred during the months and years since March 2020. Allied to Springgay and Truman's framing of research-creation, the meander is "speculative and event-oriented," following along a process that does not know itself in advance.[267] The meander is also 'artful,' in line with Manning's tending to the medieval definition of art as *the way* led by the creation of new processes rather than becoming bound to the production of a pre-determined object.[268]

Less than a month into the global COVID-19 pandemic, novelist Arundhati Roy published her article 'The pandemic is a portal,' suggesting that we consider that the unfolding tragedy, and its many personal and global traumas, presents us with a chance to envisage a more just and equitable future;

> Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.[269]

Indeed, the pandemic became a portal (as I write this, one out of which we have yet to emerge) that has led us through significant shifts and shocked global social, economic and political systems. The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, in broad daylight on the streets of Minneapolis, Minnesota, brought unprecedented global attention to systemic racism and police brutality in the United States. The murder was captured on video and rapidly circulated across social media, invigorating the Black Lives Matter movement and creating an undeniable image of the horrifying effects of systemic racism

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[267] Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 83.
[268] Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 28.
[269] Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic is a Portal," *Financial Times*, last modified April 3, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca.

that spurred significant protests throughout the United States, Canada and the world. An epic moment in history whose horror, sadness and collective energy can't be captured in words. That collective energy was sustained through protests during the spring and summer of 2020. COVID-19 prevented us from gathering together indoors, so activists took to the streets in numbers. Protests were also marked by calls to action to topple the monuments of all those historical figures whose legacies had been wiped clean of the realities of slave ownership, brutality, and the support for and creation of residential schools.[270]

The weeks between March 17 and early June stretched out indefinitely. What began as an extension to 'March break' for school children expanded week by week.[271] As the weeks passed, the contours of this research-creation project became less clear. Before March 2020, this research-creation was framed as an in-person site-specific exhibition, following the legacies of Marlene Creates' fleeting and gestural Land-based works. As March 2020 came to a close, intentions for a site-specific exhibition of performative works faded into the background, opening up space for new imaginings. The pandemic continued to seed a sense of uncertainty. My plans to visit the Toronto City Archives to look for histories and images of the Don River pre- and post-channelization, conduct site visits, and call in more artists became impossible. After some time, exchanging thoughts over email and analyzing our individual and collective safety, Danica and I made plans to return for our second visit to the river.

On June 6, 2020, a beautiful hot summer day, we met at the Riverdale Park Viaduct before travelling south along The Narrows of the Lower Don River toward the Keating Channel. The water showed little movement, and the sky was vivid blue without a single cloud. As we walked, we stopped at every bridge we passed, listening to the sound of cars overhead, reading graffiti, and doing our best to match each other's gate while trying to avoid the lively traffic of a post-lockdown, sunny Saturday afternoon on the Lower Don Trail. We ended up at the Keating Channel[272] where we saw a flock of

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[270] The statue of Egerton Ryerson, one of the primary architects of Canada's residential school system, was felled on the evening of Sunday, June 6, 2021.

[271] The Ontario government initially closed all publically funded schools across the province for two weeks following the scheduled March Break due to growing concerns about the spread of COVID-19. Closures continued to be extended, leading to an eventual permanent closure for the remainder of the 2019/2020 school year.

[272] At the time, construction and demolition of the Gardiner Expressway, as part of the Gardiner Expressway & Lake Shore Boulevard East Reconfiguration, had yet to begin. In the coming months, the Gardiner Expressway ramps (of the eastern section of the elevated highway) would be demolished ahead of the Port Lands Revitalization Project; anticipating increased traffic in the area requiring the widening of Lakeshore Boulevard East with proposals for new greenspace and cycling infrastructure including a new bridge carrying traffic over the Don River. The demolition of the easternmost portion of the Gardiner

geese lazing by the concrete-enclosed body of water leading out to Lake Ontario (fig. 9). To return to Danica's car, parked near Riverdale Park West, we walked north along the adjacent streets, through the Underpass Park basketball courts and skateboard park located beneath the overpasses of Adelaide Street, Eastern Avenue, and Richmond Street in the West Don Lands neighbourhood, before passing by a series of shiny new condo developments.

Figure 9

Keating Channel and Gardiner Expressway facing West, June 6, 2020.

Expressway and ramps resulted in the closure of access to the Keating Channel and Don River's mouth. Danica and I would return for a visit in the Fall of 2021 to find, to our surprise, the detritus and deafening noise of the demolition. Our visit to the Lower Don and Keating Channel in June 2020 would be the last time we would find the site pre-Port Lands Flood Protection and Gardiner Expressway & Lake Shore Boulevard Reconfiguration projects.

The summer of 2020 passed quickly. I was fortunate to escape the city's heavy heat to camp at Sibbald Point Ontario Park a few times over July and August. Relaxed restrictions meant more freedom and a little hope for life beyond the pandemic.

On September 21, 2020, I sent faye mullen an email to introduce them to the project and extend an invitation to participate as an artist collaborator. faye mullen is a mixed Indigenous Anishinaabe-Algonquin / settler interdisciplinary artist whose work is informed by a sculptural sensibility taking the form of site-specific interventions, sound installation and both moving and still image-making. faye and I met in the summer of 2018 when they submitted their work to an open call for the exhibition *Femynynytees* (co-curated by myself and Renata Azevedo Moreira). Through the process of realizing *Femynynytees,* faye and I developed a mutual love and care for one another. We held space together to reimagine their work *Screenshot(s)*, an Instagram-based durational performance, in the context of the group exhibition. Over meetings for coffee, many emails, group gatherings over zoom and a post-exhibition-opening closed gathering for the artists and curators to reflect, we forged our relationship with care. faye and I remained in touch and continued our relationship as friends and collaborators.

In September 2018, we had the opportunity to collaborate again for an event co-organized by the members of the Curatorial Research-Creation Collective. The collective invited faye to present a work in process for a curated gathering titled *Work the Work* alongside Erin Manning (Concordia University), Shauna Janssen (Concordia University), Monika Gagnon (Concordia University), Kim Simon (Gallery TPW), Tamara Vukov (Université de Montréal), Corinn Gerber (Passenger Books), Marc Weiser (Montreal Symphonic Orchestra), Nik Forrest (Concordia University), Tricia Toso (Concordia University), Cynthia Noury (UQAM), Agathe François (Université de Montréal), and Hilary Bergen (Concordia University). The two-day gathering brought together this group of curators, artists, researchers, students and the public for a series of dynamic and interdisciplinary presentations, questionings and conversations to investigate the critical juncture of curatorial practices and research-creation techniques. faye shared a performative work of spoken word poetry across languages (Anishinaabemowin, French and English) and asked attendees to whisper translations to one another. At the same time, they layered an array of images, videos and text on their computer screen, which was projected for the attendees. This performance was an early iteration of their ongoing work *AASAMISAG* (2019), which was later shown as an H.D. video in *'O le ūa na fua mai Manu'a* (2020) curated by Dr. Léuli Eshrāghi for the UNSW Galleries and *Quelque Part, Autrement* (2021), a virtual exhibition for Galérie UQAM curated by Ariane De Blois.

When I first contacted faye in September 2020, the contours of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* were quite fuzzy. I was hopeful that the 'end' of the pandemic was approaching, creating the conditions for in-person work to resume without danger or restrictions. I imagined that faye would produce a performative gesture with the Lower Don River as part of a two-part exhibition (the second part being an audio work by Danica Evering). I was moved by faye's performance, *Off Wall To Ground* (2018), from the exhibition *Taking Care*, curated by Anna Kerekes. *Off Wall To Ground* was performed during the 2018 Ars Electronica festival on-site at Linz University of Art and Design. The work was composed of a large white wall traversed by faye through gestural movements. The wall represents borders, barriers, and walls set in place through colonization. faye's body and movements acted as a practice of reimagining that which appears to impose a limit as a threshold. In an act of deconstruction, faye navigated the wall, moving through, along and inside its imposing materiality to honour multiculturalism, access to information and international communication. Throughout their performance, faye documented their movements in short hazy videos through their ongoing work *Screenshot(s)*.

faye's attention to the wall as a colonial structure and gestural movements suggesting its deconstruction seemed to be allied to my own thinking about The Narrows of Wonscotonach and the scars left by the colonial project of industrialization during the straightening of the river. I was thinking about the concrete reinforcing walls of the Don Improvement Project and the false promise of 'improvement' through the colonial imaginary of Land. I imagined faye moving on, through, and alongside the concrete walls of The Narrows, echoing the flowing meander of the river's natural path. I sent off my email to faye, sharing with them my very early thoughts about the exhibition and the potential of such a performance. At that moment, I had no idea how our collaboration would unfold.

A few days after sending my first communication to faye, Danica and I met for our third visit to The Narrows on September 26, 2020. We convened at Riverdale park on another perfectly sunny and hot Saturday afternoon. Danica had been working for some time on building her hydrophone so that she might be able to record the river from within (fig. 10 & 11). After I returned home from this visit, I felt the need to capture the magical encounter that transpired. I used the form of Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart's *The Hundreds* (2019) to document, in 100-word paragraphs, what took place;

Danica and I met on a sweltering September afternoon. After months of tinkering with a soldering iron and tiny mechanisms, her hydrophone was ready for its first dip in the Don. We walked south from the Riverdale Park Viaduct to the perfect spot below the Queen Street Viaduct. The hydrophone dropped into the water, and we took turns listening. Nothing. We listened

harder, attuning to each little bubble, swoosh and sound. Hardly a noise. It felt like a failure. We packed up and left, planning to return in early spring with hopes of apprehending a thaw-induced cacophony.

We walked north from the viaduct towards Dundas street bridge. Failure had expanded our attention. Considering the abundance of life. Through tender listening to the Don River, we had become attuned to the sounds of the Land. I was keen on each crack of a twig, rustle of a leaf and flap of a bird. We followed the same route back, step after step. A few hundred meters along, we were struck by the overwhelming sonic vibration of a few dozen bees. The sound was almost deafening for attentive ears harmonized with the Land—bright yellow bees on China Aster.

(Bees; Natasha Myers, 2017; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015)[273]

Figure 10

Hydrophone and Danica's hands, September 26, 2020.

[273] Following the citational practice of Berlant and Stewart, references for each of their texts are presented at the end in parenthesis. References can be writing or scholarly texts or 'things' that have come to inspire their short 100-word paragraphs, such as "pressure points," "glass," or "Star Trek."

Within the strict parameters of a one-hundred-word constraint—a piece of writing is one hundred or multiples of one hundred words long—Berlant and Stewart demonstrate affect theory. Their playful, meandering writing drifts and weaves together resonances grounded in time. The short hundreds practice a gathering of other readings, thoughts and feelings held together within a constraint of one hundred words. During a series of workshops, I practiced writing in the style of the hundreds lead by Berlant and Stewart at the Feminist Media Studio (Concordia) in 2019 (pre-pandemic). The affective intensity of my encounter with Danica, the hydrophone and the bees needed to be captured in more than just field notes. A significant shift had begun in our vision for the exhibition as the sounds of the Lower Don and its many human and nonhuman interlocutors shifted into the foreground. Simultaneously, the pandemic's pull toward the virtual was beginning to seed the imaginings of a shift away from on-site interventions towards considering the sonic histories, present and possible futures of the Lower Don.

Figure 11

Danica taking field recordings under Queen St. Bridge, September 26, 2020.

Representing place through sound—as opposed to the prioritization of image or narrative-based documentation—seemed perfectly suited to the kinds of enchanting soundscapes created by rivers and other waterways. However, sound has historically been overlooked as a mode of analyzing and documenting waterscapes because Western historical studies "have long been visual in their focus."[274] Stories and histories of the Land are often told through photographs, maps, paintings and descriptions in the written word, all relying on the visual. Peter A. Coates argues that Western history, particularly environmental history, has been "soundproofed."[275] In tending to water, particularly the flow of rivers which have become ubiquitous in environmental history, sonic experiences must not be ignored. Waterways are particularly intense sonic places. River soundscapes present a history of changing landscapes through colonization, industrialization and the more recent re-naturalization of waterways such as the Don.

In the particularity of this dissertation's site of inquiry, the calming rush of the Don waterway is heightened and mirrored by the rushing traffic flows of the adjacent Don Valley Parkway, an instance of the Don's sounds that Danica references in her soundwalk *Songs for the Narrows*. Christopher Caskey asserts that rivers "make their sounds and they have played important roles in influencing aural culture. Whether as a storytelling device, as part of an analysis, or even as an inclusion for the sake of posterity, the sounds of a river, both past and present, are worth documenting as part of the historical record."[276] Our visit to The Narrows in the Fall of 2020 was led by sonic attunement. Listening so attentively produced new experiences of and with the Lower Don, expanding beyond the kinds of attention prioritized in normative and colonial practices of connecting to place.

Learning to listen otherwise

Around this time, I also encountered the work of Xwélméxw (Stó:lō) writer, scholar and professor Dylan Robinson, who was on a 'virtual book tour' of his newly published book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. In his book, Robinson asserts that our perception of sound requires listening and that listening as a practice is not neutral. In the context of so-called Canada, informed by a colonial mindset, practices of listening 'settle perception itself.'[277] Robinson unpacks the settling of listening as a process of colonization through which missionaries, residential school

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[274] Peter A. Coates, "The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise," *Environmental History* 10, no. 4 (October 2005): 637.
[275] Coates, "The Strange Stillness of the Past," 637.
[276] Christopher Caskey, "Listening to a River: How Sound Emerges in River Histories," *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place and Community* 8 (Fall 2017): 152.
[277] Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant theory for Indigenous sound studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

staff and music teachers "set about to reform the Indigenous engagements with listening" by compelling "sensory engagement through practices of focusing attention that are 'settled'—in the sense of coming to rest of being calm."[278] Settling perception imposed "fixed listening" strategies in order to reform Indigenous listening through the "civilizing mission" of missionaries and the Canadian nation-state.[279] "Fixed listening" reorients perception toward a "Western categorization of single-sense engagement, as well as toward Western ontologies of music located in aesthetic appreciation."[280] These listening systems continue today and are still taught through university institutions. "Unifying these listening practices is the 'civilizing' drive for selective attention that renders listening as a process of the ear rather than of the body."[281] How can we reorient our listening? While the decolonization of our listening practices will be a long and arduous process, it is essential to recognize that we have "adopted settler colonial forms of perception, or 'tin ears,' that disallow us from understanding Indigenous song as both an aesthetic thing and as more-than-song"[282] as a legal and living document and as embodiment.[283]

In his practice, Dylan Robinson develops decolonial modes of listening, referencing American musicologist Susan McClary whose work is associated with 'new musicology.' In the early 1990s, McClary developed new models for feminist music analysis, suggesting that "in considering the intersections of gender, sexuality, and music, we might reach a point of production un-knowing, where we are 'no longer sure of what MUSIC is.'"[284] Robinson continues, "decolonizing musical practices involves becoming no longer sure what LISTENING is."[285] Hungry listening describes the consumptive practice of settlers named "xwelítem."[286], the Halq'eméylem word that Stó:lō people use for non-Indigenous settlers means "starving person."[287] This hunger

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[278] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 40.
[279] Robinson, 40.
[280] Ibid.
[281] Ibid., 41.
[282] Ibid., 45.
[283] For Robinson, the more-than-representational function of an Indigenous song as law and the "literal emplacement of the listener back among sensual experiences of place […as] a legal order that functions through embodiment." Ibid.
[284] Ibid., 47.
[285] Ibid.
[286] Leey'qsun scholar Rachel Flowers translates the Hul'qumi'num' (meaning 'woman of the land' or 'Indigenous woman') word for settlers as "hwulunitum," which means the hungry people. This word is a specific reference to the fact that settlers were not from the Land and thus did not have the knowledge or experience to get food, and also describes the greed of settlers to accumulate Land, people and wealth. Rachel Flowers, "Refusal to forgive: Indigenous women's love and rage," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 4, no. 2 (2015): 32-49.
[287] Robinson, *Hungry Listening,* 48.

was targeted at gold, forest, water and Land and, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, has grown into a desire for Indigenous art practices.[288] This hunger, enacted as appropriation, has involved the extraction of imagery, story, song and culture. How can we decolonize our listening without merely extracting and appropriating Indigenous sound? Robinson suggests listening as a "respectful guest, and in a way that does not seek to extract and apply a particular […] listening practice, but nonetheless listen in relation with their knowledge systems."[289] This practice of "guest listening" treats listening as entering into a "sound territory" that may be unfamiliar, even incommensurable, within a colonial form of perception. This incommensurability does not need to be remedied; instead, we must learn to act as guests and hold complexity dear. Robinson proposes that we learn to listen otherwise;

> To be starving is to be overcome with hunger so that one loses the sense of relationality and reflexivity in the drive to satisfy that hunger. Hungry listening consumes without awareness of how the consumption acts in relationship with those people, the lands, the waters who provide sustenance. Moving beyond hungry listening toward anticolonial listening practices requires that the 'fevered' pace of consumption for knowledge resources be placed aside in favor of new temporalities of wonder disoriented from antirelational and nonsituated settler colonial positions of certainty.[290]

Our practices of listening as an entry point to knowing and learning from the Don River were transformed on that hot September afternoon. As settler-Canadians, Danica and I both embodied a particular logic of doing land-based work ingrained in us through our respective training as curators, artists and scholars. The disruption of this logic of fevered and focused (and possibly extractive, though this was never the intention) attunement to the Land forced us to listen otherwise. Through the failure of our 'hungry listening' to the river sounds, our ears were re-tuned to the Land as guests. Though the river path was a familiar place for me—I have visited since early childhood—and for Danica and myself collectively—as this was our third encounter together—we experienced the sonic landscape in a new register. A deeply situated patience had been cultivated by slowing down and abandoning our expectations of what the environment could/should present to us as we listen. A relational and reflexive attunement replaced our consumptive 'hungry listening' with an embrace of the uncertainty and unpredictability of what we might encounter as we let the sounds of the landscape wash over us.

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[288] Robinson, *Hungry Listening,* 48.
[289] Robinson, 51.
[290] Ibid., 53.

The effect of our encounter and the experience of 'guest listening' to Wonscotonach for the first time became a turning point for the exhibition, bringing forth the importance of listening to the Land. This site visit created the conditions for reimagining the exhibition to emphasize sound-based work. While this was new terrain for me as a curator, my previous curatorial projects have been heavily object-based, it felt necessary to bend the conditions of the exhibition. Tending to the sounds of place as the starting point for the exhibition disengaged the exhibition's primary logic as a visual display served up for visual perception.[291] Offering an opportunity for 'guest listening' on-site, rather than in the context of a museum or gallery, further opens up the potential for multi-sensory engagement. As Dylan Robinson asserts, "to effect a decolonial crisis in the act of listening […] cannot simply entail a willful approach to kick colonial listening habits. Instead, it means shifting the places, models and structures of how we listen."[292] Decolonizing our listening, slowing the ravenous impulses of hungry listening, required that we self-reflect on our habits, privileges and biases. Curatorial practice as research-creation is driven by a process that requires self-reflexivity and an openness to the conditions of the time, space and encounter.

The contours of the exhibition shifted once again when on November 20, 2020, Ontario Premier Doug Ford announced that Peel Region and Toronto would be placed under lockdown effective November 23. All dine-in restaurants, gyms, personal care services and non-essential businesses were closed, and gatherings restricted. With this return to lockdown, I realized that the end of the pandemic could not be predicted or assumed. Thus, I would need to reimagine the exhibition as web-based, stepping away from the initially proposed on-site intervention. It was a difficult decision after holding out hope for an in-person event for nine months. Led by the conditions of the moment, I realized that a web-based exhibition would hold further importance as resistance to the colonial logic of interventionist work on the Land. The exhibition would leave no trace on the Land but on the imaginaries of those who live with and pass through the Land. Sound-based work would easily translate to a web-based format and could be accessed by anyone with a device and internet connectivity. Again, the necessary turn of a meandering curatorial process felt natural and would enrich the exhibition's meaning.

On December 8, 2020, I decided to move the exhibition online. I also sent out an email to Danica sharing the same news. Later the same day, nearly three months after I had sent out my initial invitation, faye returned with a response confirming their interest in the project and our collaborative work. The timing had aligned perfectly.

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[291] Danica and Elijah's works offer sonic interpretations of Wonscotonach through multiple and diverse lenses.

[292] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 73.

2021

I spent the next two months in a haze of ethics amendments and revisions; the shifts in the project, the timeline, and the continued restrictions and limitations of the pandemic needed to be accounted for. Multiple iterations of my research ethics were submitted, approved and then resubmitted, following changing restrictions for gathering and in-person research, between January and March 2021. Toronto, Peel and North Bay-Parry Sound remained in a stay-at-home order lockdown until March 5, 2021. On March 15, 2021, the Ontario Hospital Association declared that the province was in a third pandemic wave. On March 29, 2021, I contacted faye to formalize plans for a walk along Wonscotonach together. After some communication, we made plans to meet on April 24; Joce Two Crows would join us for our first encounter. On April 1, 2021, amid rising COVID-19 infections and the emergence of new variants, Premier Ford announced that we would enter into our second province-wide shutdown beginning April 3. On April 7, 2021, Premier Ford declared a third state of emergency to protect hospitals and the vaccination program and announced a second stay-at-home order that took effect at 12:01 am on April 8. On April 16, 2021, Ontario broke its single-day record for new daily cases for two days. Ford held a news conference to announce that the stay-at-home order would be extended until at least May 20, limiting interprovincial land travel into Ontario and controversially closing all outdoor recreation amenities.

Further, Solicitor General Sylvia Jones announced that police had been granted the right to randomly stop and question anyone in public whom they deemed may be violating the stay-at-home order. This radical measure also allowed police to demand a person's home address and reason for being out in public space and issue tickets for violating a public health order. The measures faced heavy criticism for their apparent similarities to the past practice of carding, which has historically had a disproportionate impact on BIPOC. Shortly after the announcement, multiple municipal police departments issued public statements that they would not enforce this extreme measure. By the next day, the provincial government clawed back the initial steps. The collective shock regarding the proposal of such actions, even though they were not fully enforced, was palpable.

With the backdrop of closures of outdoor recreation activities explicitly targeting lower-income areas and basketball courts and the continued BLM protests after the murder of George Floyd, there was a growing concern for the safety of BIPOC. On April 19, I contacted faye, suggesting that we reschedule our site visit in light of the ever-increasing concerns around the safety of public space, particularly the decreased safety for Black and Indigenous people and ongoing concerns around new COVID-19 variants.

As a settler-curator working with an Indigenous artist on Indigenous Land, I did my best to tend to my collaborator's different needs and experiences. I take settler curator

Maeve Hanna's assertion that it is "important to remember as curators and as settlers […] that the objective of the artists—rather than our curatorial endeavor—must always be at the fore. This is essential within the context of this position, wherein it is the Indigenous voice that requires us to listen, and the curatorial voice, which is often white and also often male, should be listening instead of reframing the work within a structure that in the end does not support it."[293] I wanted to be present for faye's first visit to Wonscotonach in the context of my own curatorial process, but that did not matter. As any settler curator must, I did my best to create space for and listen to faye's needs and ensure the safety of them and their community, in turn furthering our shared trust. faye and Joce Two Crows walked along Wonscotonach together on April 24.

On May 28, 2021, evidence of approximately 200 unmarked burials was found near the Kamloops Indian Residential School in Kamloops, on the lands of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation. As I write this, over 2,300 unmarked gravesites have been uncovered at residential schools across Canada.[294] I contacted faye and Danica, sending my love and support and the suggestion that we collectively take the summer away from the exhibition as a critical moment to grieve and heal. faye and Danica both welcome this proposal. Moments of horror pregnant with transformative potential incise the pandemic timescale. As unmarked residential school graves continue to be uncovered, it is unknown how we will emerge on the other side of the portal.

On June 23, 2021, I invited my mother to join me for a walk along Wonscotonach, to revisit the place she introduced me to as a child. Propelled by both the feelings of safety and childlike wonder that were reignited by my mother's presence and our return to the river, we bravely veered off the footpath through low brush and between high old trees. Our curiosity took us to a place we had never been before, an opening where we found an old rail bridge crossing the river East to West located north of the red-weathering pedestrian bridge. We walked along the bridge, across the river until its end, where the railway tracks disappeared into a lush green mess of overgrowth consumed by nature. When I returned home, I wrote another 'hundred':

My mom arrived in Toronto in the 1980s. She came to be with her high-school sweetheart and worked at his family's business in Cabbagetown. I heard stories of summers scooping ice cream until 'one arm was bigger than the other' at a small snack shop near 'the park.' These memories are hers and mine, though mine float around divorced from materiality. On a June afternoon, we walked the Lower Don, treading a path neither of us had followed before. After our walk, we continued wandering, arriving at the intersection of Sumach and Winchester street, where the

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[293] Maeve Hanna, "Indigenous Voices and white pedagogy," *Esse: Taking a Stance*, Fall 2015, 85.
[294] This number is continually being updated as more unmarked graves are uncovered.

snack shop materialized.

(Mother; fate)

During the final days of August 2021, I travelled by train to Montreal to meet with the Curatorial Research-Creation Collective (myself, Matthew-Robin Nye and karen wong) for a three-day writing intensive at the Parc national d'Oka. We gathered to begin work on a book chapter for *Media, Practice and Theory: tracking emergent thresholds of experience*, edited by Nicole De Brabandere, titled *A Latento for Curation as Research-Creation*, published by Vernon Press in Fall 2022. Raqs Media Collective define a *latento* as "an elaboration of that which is latent or hidden, it is the antonym of a manifesto, an assertion of that which is clearly evident."[295] Our *latento* for curation as research-creation tends to the latent potentials within the hyphen of research-creation and its intersections with curatorial practice, attuning to the minor registers of its processual unfolding. We spent three days and nights in a beautiful tiny cottage at Parc national d'Oka, reading, talking, cooking, tending a fire, and writing together.

September 2021 arrived, and we began making plans for faye, Danica and myself to meet and visit Wonscotonach together. We decided to gather on October 2. On September 29, 2021, I received news from faye that a family member had passed. I sent my most profound condolences and the suggestion that they take as much time as they needed to heal before returning to our collective work. In the end, faye was unable to continue with the project.[296]

October 2, 2021, Danica and I kept our meeting to walk Wonscotonach. We got a coffee and snack and sat on a picnic bench in Riverdale Park East to catch up. She gifted me with a calming salve made from materials harvested from her garden. I gave Danica a book of poetry, *The Blind Man's Eyes*, by Mi'kmaq poet and songwriter Rita Joe, with a bookmark adorned with bees marking the poem *My River Runs Free*. We began our walk heading north from the Riverdale Park Viaduct to the red-weathering bridge, where we veered off the path on the west side to get to the top of the abandoned rail track; following the route my mother and I had uncovered in June (fig. 12). We circled once and came back in a loop to the same place where we left the main path at the red-weathering bridge. Again, we left the main trail, this time we headed below the train tracks following Danica's route. We came to a spot under the tracks where a massive

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[295] Raqs Media Collective, *Fragments from a Communist Latento,* installation, 2010. 8th Shanghai Biennale.
[296] This mutual and challenging decision was made because of circulating questions around faye's Indigenous ancestry.

fallen tree met the shore, and there we began our offering to Wonscotonach (fig. 13). Danica read *My River Runs Free* by Rita Joe;

> A broken record of willpower gone wrong.
> Where else can this river flow, how high the banks
> The seed has to land somewhere, why not here?
> Canada, Canada, let us not be backward but go ahead.
> Discrimination does not suit the Land, our rivers run free
> We educate, we practice, we tell
>
> We love, we love
> I should know. I have worn your moccasin for so long
> Today I want to wear mine, my story told in the schools
> Today I share, my river runs free.[297]

then made an offering of a bouquet of wildflowers she picked from her garden. I read an excerpt from *Don Song*, "Teaching #1: Urban Landscape", by Rebeka Tabobondung;

> I found a song along the Don River
> just before you run into the tents and shacks
> where the brown water picks up
> you can easily climb down to the muddy shore
> hardly anyone goes down that far
> on the Discovery Trail
> except for the fast bikers
> and the people who live there
> I'm told at one time
> the River's mass used to glide across the entire valley
> It has always been a highway
> before cars were thought of
> or White people
> birch bark used to cut the water
> passing songs along the shores[298]
>
> (excerpt from Rebeka Tabobondung, *Don Song*, 2002)

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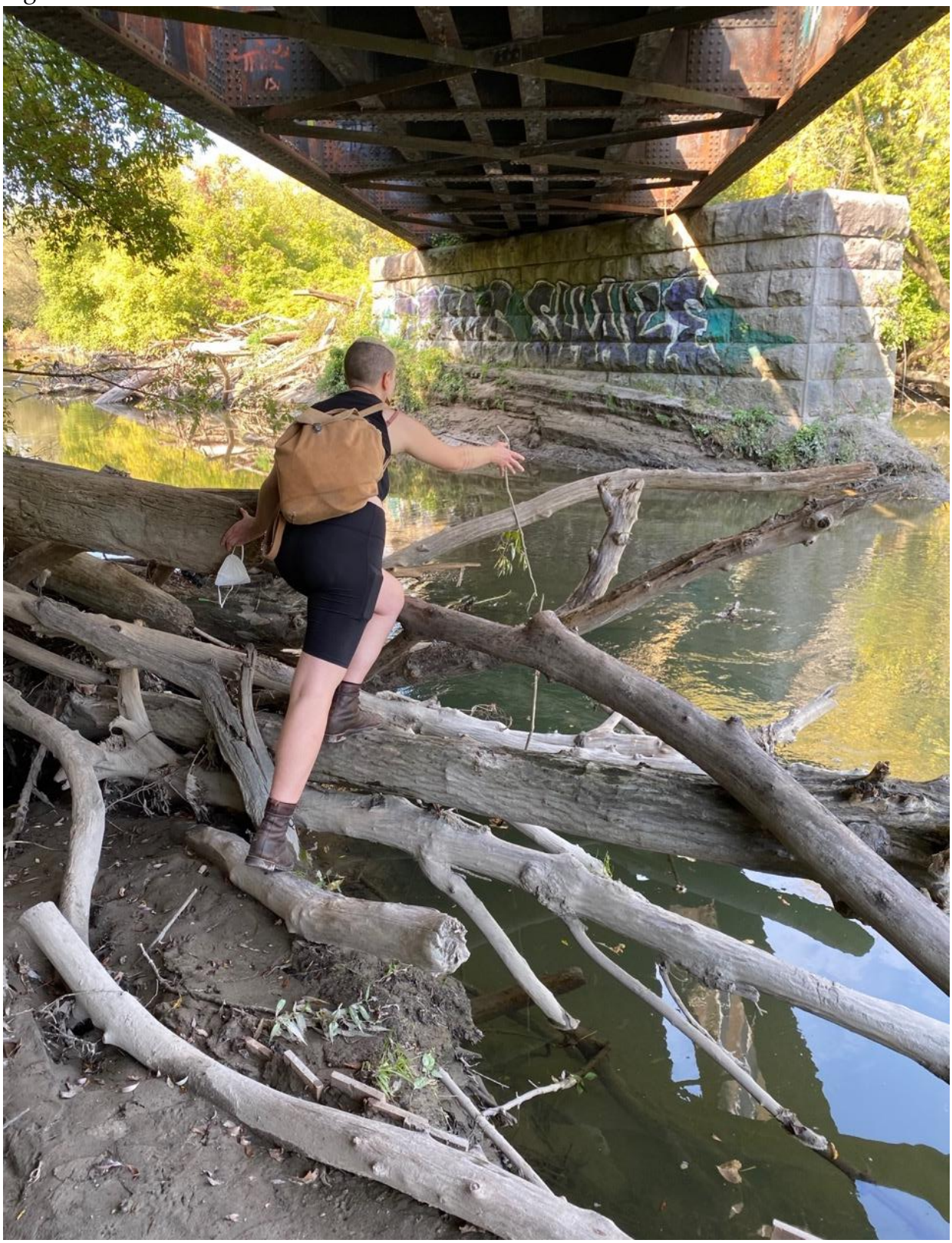
[297] Rita Joe, "My River Runs Free," in *The Blind Man's Eyes: New and Selected Poetry* (Sydney, NS: Breton Books, 2015).
[298] Rebeka Tabobondung, "Don Song," in *Indigenous Toronto: Stories that Carry This Place*, ed. Denise Bolduc, et al. (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2021), 59.

Figure 12

Danica walking the abandoned rail track with an offering of flowers, October 2, 2021.

Figure 13



Danica making an offering to the Don River under the abandoned rail bridge, October 2, 2021.

and Danica brought out tobacco grown from her mother's garden. We each took a handful, blew our intentions into it three times and offered tobacco to Wonscotonach in thanks. Danica shared her mother's wisdom that the Land always knows tobacco as an offering, and as settlers, we can make an offering to communicate with the Land in a manner it will understand.

We left our offering place and walked back to the bike and pedestrian trail, which was quite busy that day. It was 24 degrees, and the skies were clear blue. We did our best to walk at a constant rhythm so that Danica could pace the timing for her audio walk and make a note of landmarks along the river. Once again, we saw the same cluster of Aster and goldenrod from the previous year, with only two or three languid bees, found that day. We walked, keeping time from the red weathering bridge just north of the Riverdale Park Viaduct crossing to the Queen Street bridge. We stopped timing as Danica felt this would be a natural place to end her audio walk. We decided to continue and walk the rest of the straightened section of the Lower Don to the Keating Channel. Just before Lake Shore Boulevard East, the remaining trail was blocked off. On the other side of the bridge crossing the river at Lakeshore Boulevard, we could see giant bulldozers tearing up the foundations of the Gardiner Expressway, cut off abruptly in the sky. We continued our walk west along the Lower Don Recreation Trail to Cherry Street and then began our walk back up the Lower Trail to the East side of Riverdale Park, where we parted ways.

During our visit, Danica remarked on our methods of engaging with the site, suggesting that we were following the same kind of wonderment and curiosity that had propelled me along the river path as a child. Curiosity, as allied to research-creation's pull toward the unknown— according to Manning, research-creation is a process that does not know itself in advance—became a reoccurring theme in my curatorial process.

Following curiosity

In *How to Make art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation*, Loveless brings forth a connection between curiosity, the curatorial and research-creation. Looking at etymological connections, she notes that the word *curious* has the same root as *careful* or *curate*.[299] Research-creation, she suggests, is a practice that "*fails* to resolve clearly into either 'art' or 'scholarship'"[300] is an "uncanny practice" linked to the libidinal drive or what Loveless calls curiosity.[301] Aligning curiosity, care, and curating, she notes

[299] Loveless, *Manifesto for Research-Creation*, 47.
[300] In her book, Natalie Loveless aligns research-creation's "failure" with Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), in which he makes a claim for failure as a site of political resistance.
[301] Loveless, 47.

that they share a "warning (caution), desire (to know), and considered choice (the *care* at stake in curation)."[302] This constellation of experiences, like research-creation, challenges the pedagogical impulse of mastery or expertise reserved for a select few instead of valuing other perspectives, stories and knowledges that are "much riskier for all involved, but more accurate, and more interesting."[303] A researcher does not need to know what they will find, just that something is interesting enough to pursue.

Loveless unpacks the connection between research-creation and curiosity, noting that "the uncanny asserts that feeling displaced (ignorant) at the moment one feels one should be at home (knowledgeable) *is the condition of knowledge making at its best*, the condition that drives curiosity (as a drive to *aim* rather than to *attain*), and a condition that cannot be predicted."[304] Curiosity brings excitement for the unknown, a pull towards the "strange and unusual."[305] Curiosity can emerge when we least expect it, punctuating our work as researchers; "curiosity erupts."[306] Through our musings on curiosity, a new interest erupted, reimagining the exhibition with the inclusion of a third artistic voice. I thought the exhibition would benefit from adding a new artist before meeting with Danica, though I did not know who that might be. Danica's comments on the significance of my connection and approach to the site as bound to childhood experiences made it immediately clear that I needed to invite another collaborator who had been with me through the curious wonderment of childhood.

Elijah Harper and I met in the 7th grade, and our friendship began immediately. We spent the years from the ages of 16 to 19 as neighbours in Scarborough, and almost every Friday was marked by a movie night or a drive around downtown Toronto, exploring the city together. We have travelled together, and supported one another through his coming-out, family hardships, relationships, coming-of-age and finding ourselves in the process. Working with a site that was formative for me as a child, it felt natural that this collaboration should fold in one of my dearest friends. Elijah is a Toronto-born LGBTQ2+ pianist, beat-maker and synth-pop producer with Jamaican ancestry. His creative practice varies between music production and dance, crossing genres such as classical and contemporary and using remix and sampling to connect his identity and personal experiences to critique larger forces of power and discipline. His connection to the city of Toronto and his unique approach to composition were a natural fit for the sound-based exhibition.

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[302] Ibid.
[303] Ibid.
[304] Ibid.
[305] Ibid.
[306] Ibid.

Figure 14

Elijah walking north along the abandoned rail tracks, October 23, 2021.

When I met Elijah for lunch to tell him about the project, he had just left a corporate job to begin pursuing his creative work full-time. Once again, following the meander, the timing of this project's unfolding was serendipitous. On October 23, 2021, Elijah and I convened for our first walk along the river. We went for lunch in Toronto's gay village and walked East to Riverdale park. We stopped at the center of the Riverdale Park Viaduct to look down at the river and talk about its history. I shared the story of the Don Improvement Project, which Elijah hadn't previously known. He was fascinated by the process of re-learning about such a familiar site with a new lens and considering the complex history of the colonial development of the canalized river. We walked up to the red weathered bridge (about 100 meters north of the Riverdale Park Viaduct) and turned off onto the secret path that crosses the railway. We crossed the tracks and found two lovers sitting on the rocks on the north side of the bridge. Then, Elijah decided we should continue to follow the tracks north through the overgrown brush to see how far they go (fig. 14). We walked until we came to a small bridge that crosses over the Lower Don Trail, where we were able to jump down and rejoin the trail returning south. We

travelled south, exchanging stories of our childhood with the Don. Elijah recounted an experience of travelling the trail on a bike with his mom when she fell, injuring her head, a visual memory he won't forget. We considered our relation to the site as one now inflected with a childlike curiosity, a way of encountering a place we don't take up in adulthood. Walking together allowed us to share stories and ideas based on the context of the Lower Don landscape.

A few days after our first walk along The Narrows, I invited Elijah to join me at an event organized by the Wave Art Collective. We travelled together to the U of T Scarborough Campus to follow the collective on a walk along the Rouge River to activate their newly released three-part audio exhibition, *A Space Between Waves* (2021). We walked together, following the Rouge River, responding to questions about our childhood: *What was your first memory? A memory of Scarborough? What is the oldest item from your family?* We stopped periodically to listen to excerpts from the audio works. Each piece presented a mash-up of interwoven audio—conversations between the artist and his immigrant parents, field recording and archival clips—that echoed the rich and multilayered history of Scarborough's geography and culture. During our walk, we were fortunate to see 6 or 7 massive salmon travelling upstream along the Rouge, each roughly the size of a human leg. At the end, we paused to reflect on a moment when 'we got lost to find ourselves'. We spoke literally and then metaphorically, thinking about Elijah's new life path and my struggles composing this project and writing a dissertation during the pandemic. It was a profound moment, during which a ladybug kept near Elijah, and a dragonfly sat on me for several minutes.

Over the coming weeks, the Curatorial Research-Creation Collective met periodically to continue work on our *latento* book chapter, writing and editing together over Zoom, preparing to submit a complete draft for peer review. On December 9, 2021, I went to Elijah's apartment to hear the first version of his audio work. The layered beat began foregrounded by a melodic rush of water before building slowly into a cacophony of sounds of an urban landscape under the thrum of a sway-worthy dance beat. When I first listened to Elijah's audio work, I was so moved by how he captured the landscape of the straightened lower Don River through his experience as a Queer Black man growing up in Toronto. Tensions of police surveillance depicted through echoing sirens, slowing water flows illustrating the scars of urban development, and moments of joy in the form of a catchy dance beat were woven together in a complex sonic tapestry. After listening, we discussed the future direction of his work and the potential for an overlaid narrative in the form of spoken-word poetry.

I travelled to England for the holidays with my partner Nolan; during that time, I prepared an application for Whippersnapper gallery's open call for exhibitions under

the thematic *Intuition Against the Grain*. The proposal was for the digital exhibition to be displayed in the gallery alongside an expanded presentation of the curatorial archive—including notes from the field, hundreds[307], video recordings and photos of site visits and archival images—with a programmed walk that would connect Whippersnapper Gallery and its location in Chinatown (West of Yonge Street) to the intertwined history of gentrification in the East End through the development of the Lower Don River and its many bridges (Riverdale Park Viaduct, Gerrard Street Bridge, Queen Street Bridge). Whippersnapper shortlisted the proposal, but ultimately it was not selected.

2022

During the months of early Winter 2022, I was occupied by teaching two courses at OCAD University and work on the exhibition *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* took a necessary pause, a brief moment of drought within the flows of a meandering process. Knowing when a break or a bit of space is needed is essential for a process to unfold with the conditions of its time. I finished teaching in the late spring of 2022; the semester at OCAD University had ended late due to a late start imposed by the Omicron COVID-19 variant in January 2022. The following weeks were spent dedicated to writing and tracing the ebbs and flows of the meander.

In April 2022, Danica sent me an initial script for her *Songs for the Narrows*, and we had an exchange over email, sharing notes, suggestions and new things we had come to learn about the lower river and its surrounds. Elijah and I shared emails back and forth, thinking through the final form of his work. Throughout the summer, we checked in periodically, working mostly independently; Danica and Elijah on their audio works and myself on writing. The exhibition began to quickly fold together as summer came to a close. Elijah and I met in Kensington Market to discuss the final exhibition layout and his work, and Danica sent a rough cut of her five-movement sound walk.

In mid-August, I travelled to Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, to attend the *Institute for Curatorial Inquiry* at Agnes Etherington Art Centre and present at a sister conference, *Museum without Walls* at the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts. On the first day of the Institute for Curatorial Inquiry, I walked to Agnes for a performance led by Mohawk, Turtle Clan from Six Nations of the Grand River, artist J.P. Longboat and his collaborator Kanyen'kehá:ka photographer, filmmaker and journalist from Kenhtè:ke (Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory), Shelby Lisk as part of *Along the Way: Decolonial Ecologies Playgroup*. Attendees of the institute gathered to think through our relations to the Land. Led by J.P. Longboat, who shared Indigenous teachings about building a bundle to carry us into the next season, we looked at the plant life he had

[307] Inspired by the process-led speculative writing of Berlant and Stewart in their book *The Hundreds*, 2019.

gathered from the area. At the same time, Shelby Lisk moved around the group, gathered in a circle, offering a chance to feel and connect to the nearby waterway by touching a bit of cool water she had collected from the Saint Lawrence River that morning. Shelby's warm energy struck me. J.P. Longboat described the collaboration, which resulted in Shelby creating an audio work to accompany his installation. While I did not have time to speak to Shelby at the event, I had to run to the Museums without Walls conference for the afternoon, I noted her name and emailed her about *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* as soon as I returned home to Toronto.

In my initial email to Shelby, I introduced the exhibition project and suggested that there may be some affinities between our respective work with Ontario waterways. A little over a week later, she responded with interest in collaborating and sharing the audio work that corresponds with J.P. Longboat's video/installation work. The audio overlays rushing waters with the sounds of children from the language immersion school in Six nations reciting Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen ('the words before all else,' also known as the thanksgiving address). In our email correspondence, Shelby described the inspiration behind this work:

> [I] started with water as the central element, so I went to the place where my ancestors arrived in Tyendinaga and retraced their steps. I asked myself, what were our sounds before we left our traditional territory and were relocated to Tyendinaga and what were the sounds we encountered when we got here? What has happened to our sounds since then?[308]

Shelby restructured the children's recitation by beginning the audio with them speaking the ending words of Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen and ending with the beginning, creating a sense of cyclicality and suggesting that even if language is reordered or "jumbled," it can be brought back together. Through this gesture of reordering, Shelby's work honours the labours of many Indigenous peoples who are working to reclaim the languages stolen from them. Fading and reemerging voices of the children further celebrate the return of languages that have long been silenced. Shelby shares, "just like in my family, where our language went silent for many years, generations, now it's coming back."[309]

Shelby's audio work is led by water and shares an interest in learning and understanding a place through its sounds. Thinking through how soundscapes change over time, I was interested in the connection between the Don River and the waterways

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[308] Shelby Lisk, Email message to author, September 5, 2022.
[309] Lisk, Email, September 5, 2022.

of Tyendinaga, which flow together into Lake Ontario. Further, what does it mean to follow sounds we may not understand? What is the impact of immersing oneself in a soundscape that evades or is not entirely accessible? In her short book, *The Democracy of Species*, Indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer tells us, "listening in wild places, we are audience to conversations in a language not our own."[310] Some languages, scientific language, define boundaries of knowing.[311]

Shelby and I met over Zoom on September 23, 2022. With only a few months before the exhibition would be shared publically, we discussed the possibility of incorporating an existing work. While I was initially inspired by her recording of the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen we also discussed her video diptych *All that will remain*. The two-channel video shows Shelby at the shore of a body of water gathering sand into a formation against the rushing tides; in the other frame, her sand formation is reclaimed by water as it rushes past, dissolving the human-made structure.

In the days after meeting with Shelby, I came across a Toni Morrison quote that captured the essence of Shelby's video work *All that will remain*:

> You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.[312]

Water returns to the place from which it was displaced, just as the Don River floods its banks, returning to where the meander once flowed. I realized that Shelby's video work would illustrate the complex—and horribly poetic—relationship between the Don River's straightening and canalization and the current revitalization and flood protection project at the mouth and Port Lands. By 2024, the straightened canal of The Narrows will be buttressed by meanders on both its north and south ends. The city of Toronto and its developers have learned that the channel does not prevent floods and thus found the value of the meander for flood protection. The Port Lands Flood Protection Project will re-naturalize the river's mouth, creating a flood protection zone by constructing a meander that will traverse through the formerly industrial Port Lands leading the Don River out into Lake Ontario (fig. 15 & 16). Shelby's video, *All that will*

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[310] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Democracy of Species* (London: Penguin Random House, 2013), 2.
[311] Kimmerer, *The Democracy of Species*, 2.
[312] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* 2nd edition, ed. William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 99.

remain, as the final work in *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* looks to the bristling tension of past and future choices for the Don River, gesturing towards the power of water always to find its way.

Figure 15

Keating channel aerial view, 2017. Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

Figure 16

Aerial rendering of future Villiers Island, 2019. Waterfront Toronto.

A note for the reader

At this moment, I suggest you take a pause from the written component and view the exhibition *improvement becomes a wall and the river meanders still*.

The exhibition can be viewed at the following Url: https://therivermeandersstill.ca.

Password: DonRiver2022

After experiencing the exhibition—at the Lower Don River or anywhere—continue reading Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: 'Mouth'
At the exhibition's edge

The river's mouth is not an *end*, but an emergent flow into a larger body of water such as a lake, gulf, sea or ocean. Determining an *end* to a research-creation project is difficult precisely because research-creation's questions and techniques are formed in the process of making-thinking. Research-creation does not know itself in advance; it does not set out with a clear trajectory and final finished object in mind. Like the mouth of a river, this research-creation exhibition does not end. Instead, it emerges into a new set of relations already on their way in the larger context of virtual and physical public space. In this final chapter, I reflect on the exhibition *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*, the aesthetic and curatorial choices and an expansion of the three artworks themselves.

Through the necessary shift online prompted by COVID-19, this exhibition (like others that have emerged and adapted during the last two and a half years) had to be reimagined for an entirely new platform. What is an online exhibition? Unlike physical exhibition spaces, which have more widely known and assumed conventions and prepare visitors for a particular kind of structure or format—we understand the white cube is for contemporary art; we must move slowly through the gallery, speak in hushed tones, may or may not be able to touch or interact with the work—online exhibitions vary widely. Online exhibitions may take the form of a crowd-funded campaign,[313] a virtual exhibition in Second Life, a curated exhibition in Unity,[314] a simple website presenting links to artists' works, an app showing one or a selection of smartphone-based VR or AR works,[315] and many other possible permutations. What is clear is that the online exhibition is much less defined than the gallery or museum exhibition. Trying to find a model or inspiration for my exhibition with a vast and unknowable number, and different types, of online exhibitions proved overwhelming. However, the move to an online curatorial proposition allowed me to consider the exhibition as a "context-dependent cultural practice"[316] that could adapt specifically to the meaning and intention of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*.

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[313] *Exhibition Kickstarter*, 2014, curated by Krystal South.

[314] *v r $4.99*, by Pippin Bar, an exhibition of various assets purchased on the Unity Asset Store for $4.99USD each.

[315] Nuit Blanche Toronto 2020, *The Space Between Us*, which included a program called *Nuit in Your Neighbourhood* featuring more than 20 AR and VR commissions by artists such as Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Shelly Niro and Caroline Monnet, to name a few.

[316] Michael Connor, "Curating Online Exhibitions, Part 1: Performance, variability, objecthood," Rhizome.org, last modified May 13, 2020. https://rhizome.org/editorial/2020/may/13/curating-online-exhibitions-pt-1/#_ftn6.

As my first foray into curating an online exhibition, I was still determining how to begin. I had experience designing websites but had yet to think about that work in relation to the curatorial. This was unfamiliar territory complicated by the fact that the histories of online exhibitions are not particularly well documented and 'online exhibition' is such a broad category. While the field of museum studies has a clear idea of the 'exhibition' as a process of ordering objects and bringing them into relation with one another, online exhibitions propose several challenges to such a definition.[317] Digital exhibitions are not a selection of coherent objects gathered together but rather performative assemblages of hardware and software that often rely on audience participation. For the artistic director of Rhizome Michael Connor, digital artworks are "performed, not merely displayed."[318] Further, online exhibitions are not translatable exactly 'as they are' between unified, coherent spaces; they change (potentially radically) across different user interfaces.[319] Connor suggests, "rather than a mere arrangement of works in space, the online exhibition involves arranging a multifaceted mise-en-scène to accommodate an unfolding event."[320]

The mise-en-scène of an online exhibition brings together performative works in a dynamic relation between one another and a broader network context folding in platforms, user interface, hardware device(s) and the individual situations in which one might encounter the work(s). In the context of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*, the exhibition is presented as a single scrolling page which unfolds in tandem with the suggested walking path along the river. The three works are presented within three 'acts' of the exhibition, which offer some context for each of the works' locations at the Lower Don River through writing, images and maps (hyperlinked to coordinates on Google Maps). Within this online exhibitionary structure, varying experiences were considered. The written prompts frame the exhibition with a short introduction:

> *Here is where you begin your journey through the exhibition improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still. Virtual artworks by Danica Evering, Elijah Harper and Shelby Lisk are presented on a single scrolling page curated by Treva Pullen-Legassie. You may experience the exhibition while walking The Narrows of the Lower Don River Trail or anywhere. If you are at the Don River, follow the guiding prompts and maps to orient yourself. Scroll slowly.*

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[317] Connor, "Curating Online Exhibitions."
[318] Connor.
[319] Screen size, for example, changes the look and feel of the exhibition between a desktop computer and a mobile phone.
[320] Connor, "Curating Online Exhibitions."

The introductory prompt and situating texts for each of the exhibition's three 'acts' (discussed in detail below) suggest an unlimited potential for how audiences may engage with the exhibition.

Following the initial introduction to the exhibition, *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* opens in a good way, with attention to the Land and the knowledge that all things must be in a reciprocal relationship and that we must continually protect and give back to the Land while never taking more than our share. Opening with a recording of my voice reciting a Land Acknowledgment, I place myself, my knowledge, and my experience within a history of systemic harms and their continued effects. More than an acknowledgment of the Land, the audio recording situates my *relation* to the Land. It expands upon the custodianship of the treaty lands on which I live and work (and where this exhibition came into being) while attending to Indigenous knowledges and agreements, specifically describing the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant. Setting this intention as an opening follows a commitment to braiding together settler and Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies and frames the following three artworks and their specific connection to the Lower Don River.

In the context *of improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* (wherein audiences will access the exhibition from various locations both at the Lower Don River and from anywhere else one has an internet connection), the translation between mobile and desktop versions was seriously considered. The website's ability to adapt between a horizontal desktop version and a vertical mobile version was necessary. Text and image orientations were modified accordingly to ensure both versions were equally legible and aesthetically appealing. Text and images float into view as the audience scrolls through the exhibition. Each act begins with a title followed by a short description of where to locate yourself if you are experiencing the works on location. A circular cropped black and white map of the location marked with an orange dot indicates the place to begin each work. The map image links to the site's coordinates on Google so that those on location can easily access directions on a map, and those elsewhere can view the expanded map and explore the landscape through Google Street View if they choose. A short framing paragraph describes the starting point for each of the three movements.

As the audience scrolls past negative space, an archival image, chosen to contextualize each of the works, fades into view. The black and white archival photos have been altered using an image effect that makes them appear to undulate, like a river or water disturbed by droplets. This effect brings the archival images to life, making them feel more cinematic than historical. The curatorial intent of this linear exhibition format—which meanders through different forms punctuated by the two audio and single video

works—is to guide users through a narrative, expanding their understanding of the site without being overly prescriptive about how they should engage with the exhibition.

A linked button appears alongside each of the audio works inviting deaf and/or blind audiences to access a screen-reader enabled page with a full transcript of each work. Through conversations with my collaborator Danica, who prompted me to think more deeply about the online exhibition's accessibility, I designed a page layout that could be used with a screen reader and features a side-by-side transcript and audio description (which Danica provided for her own work). Each 'transcript page' opens in a new tab, allowing audiences to access the exhibition and transcript simultaneously. Danica also suggested that her work should be downloadable so that audiences who don't have access to data could pre-download the exhibition's components over Wi-Fi to be able to listen onsite without internet access. Furthering the exhibition's accessibility, I took seriously Danica's suggestion and gathered consent from the other artists to make their work available to download and added download links to each audio file on the website. Finally, the cropped black and white maps marking the location from which to experience each work and linked to the site's coordinates on Google maps were included not only as a locating device but also to create the opportunity for those unable to visit or access the Lower Don Trail to follow along and explore the landscape with Google Street View.

A move online

The early days of the global COVID-19 pandemic saw an incredible turn to the online sphere; exhibitions, communities, exchanges, and meetings all moved online. Within this movement, many exhibitions made this transition online through an attempted replication of or stand-in for a 'real' art experience modelled after the gallery or museum in its more traditional forms (the white cube, the salon)[321]. For Connor, online exhibitions that modelled the physical gallery "may only serve as a reminder of a life on hold, inviting direct comparison with the 'real' thing, and drawing attention to what is missing from the experience."[322] Connor's critique is not meant to discount the multitude of initiatives that emerged to make physical gallery exhibitions and museum

[321] Before the pandemic, hundreds of institutions created 3-D tours of their galleries made available online through Google Arts & Culture, for example, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, Frida Kahlo's Casa Azul in Mexico City and the Tokyo National Museum. During the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in recreating the museum online skyrocketed with the development of digital exhibitions such as the Museum of Modern Art's (MOMA) "Virtual Views" of *Surrealist Women*, the Peabody Essex Museum's *Jacob Lawrence: The American Struggle* which was rendered in 3-D so that virtual visitors could 'walk' through the exhibition, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent's 360-degree virtual reality tour of the galley for their blockbuster Jan van Eyck exhibition *Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution*.

[322] Connor, "Curating Online Exhibitions."

collections accessible online but rather to suggest that, given the necessary shift online, we may think more creatively about the affordances of online exhibitions. Rather than trying to replicate the experience, layout, format, and modes of the physical gallery (or even conventions of a public site-specific exhibition), I wanted to embrace the distinctive qualities of born-digital culture. Rather than relying on traditional gallery exhibitions as a sole point of reference, I began exploring online exhibitions as a unique practice. The nature of online exhibitions, which are performative, variable, and open to infinite formulations, created the conditions for new possibilities.

improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still takes inspiration from several online exhibition projects that emerged during the pandemic. Through the pandemic, Galerie de l'UQAM created a series of four online exhibitions called *QUADrature*, inspired by Samuel Beckett's *Quad* (1980). The four exhibitions, curated by four guest curators and each featuring the works of 4 artists, all followed the same exhibition format. Designed by Montreal-based LOKI Design Studio, the web-based exhibition platform is simple, appearing as a divided screen composed of 4 panels presenting the four works in each exhibition. *QUADtrature*'s online exhibition platform was inspired aesthetically by Beckett's performative work, created for the square frame of a 1980s-television screen and conceptually by *Quad*'s anonymous performers' repetitive actions, which suggested a link to the pandemic's routines, social and physical distancing and concealed faces. The exhibition platform was conceived for the digital arena.

LOKI Design Studio created a curatorial platform that would not attempt to stage a replication of the gallery but rather develop a unique born-digital structure that would present the exhibition's conceptual link to Beckett's *Quad* and be replicated across the series of four exhibitions. Beginning outside of the framework of the physical gallery space and its structuring principals and conventions, *QUADtrature* embraced the perceived shortcomings of the digital arena to create a "forum for curatorial experimentation, interrogation, trial-and-error and new beginnings."[323] The second exhibition in the *QUADrature* series, *Somewhere, Otherwise* (2021), curated by Ariane De Blois, features the works of Anna Binta Diallo, faye mullen, Mona Sharma and Leila Zelli. The works in this exhibition use strategies of remixing and restaging images to challenge extremist voices and views that can too often be upheld online. The exhibition presents four video and image-based works explicitly conceived for digital screens. The four presentations that form the *QUADrature* series of programming are no longer accessible; however, their approach to born-digital curatorial visioning inspired this research-creation's early approach to online exhibition-making. The curatorial vision,

[323] "Somewhere, Otherwise," La Galerie UQAM, accessed September 23, 2022, https://galerie.uqam.ca/en/expositions/somewhere-otherwise/.

led by the aesthetic and experiential platform created by LOKI design studio, is an example of a digital exhibition that embraces the digital medium rather than trying to replicate the codes and conventions of an inaccessible physical gallery space.

The first iteration of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* was developed as a multi-page website that would guide viewers through three exhibition phases. The exhibition's landing page was sparse, displaying the titles of the three exhibition phases on a grey background; when the viewer would hover over the titles, a different black and white archival image of the Lower Don River would appear. Clicking on each title would bring the viewer to a scrolling page that described the exhibition's link to *The Meander*, *The Narrows* and *The Borderland*. The pages, though only ever roughly staged, included field notes, images and a description of the works. The intention was for faye mullen's work to be exhibited on *The Meander* page, Danica Evering's work on *The Narrows* and Elijah Harper's work on *The Borderland*. The containment of each work on its own page (and the curatorial decision-making around what narratives and aspects of the curatorial process archive to include) proved difficult and counterintuitive. The containment of each work in its discrete page did not match the flowing and individualized modes of encounter I sought to curate through the exhibition platform and audio works within it. Following a curatorial model of 'framing' each of the works within a specific and unique context—contextualizing each audio work within its virtual site (page)—seemed to echo the kind of gallery-based curatorial process I was used to; wherein each piece has its designated space and a corresponding didactic from which relations can be staged. It did not work. Navigation through the online exhibition was messy and confusing. Links between the emergence of each work and its connection to the site of the Lower Don needed to be drawn out through extraneous didactics and descriptions; many were repeated on each page to ensure that audiences would get the information they needed regardless of where they began or ended the virtual exhibition. Planning for each contingency of how a viewer might encounter the work across three isolated pages proved clunky and repetitive. Rather than having to over-determine the potential choreographies of a viewer's encounter with each audio piece, I wanted the exhibition's navigation to follow the meandering flows of the curatorial process.

Connor suggests, "in staging an online exhibition, it is important to embrace the openness of the situation" rather than attempt to overdetermine how a user will engage with the work(s).[324] Working with, rather than against, the particularities of an online exhibition, I abandoned my curatorial impulses based on my experiences curating for/in

[324] Michael Connor, "The Rules of the Game, Curating Online Exhibitions, Part 2: Mise-en-scène," Rhizome.org, last modified April 12, 2021. https://rhizome.org/editorial/2021/apr/12/the-rules-of-the-game/.

physical exhibition sites and gallery spaces. Instead of trying to frame each work on its own, I wanted the exhibition to weave together the artworks and pieces of the archive of the curatorial process, which included field notes, images, video and audio recordings. With this freedom from exhibitionary structures, I began to imagine how I would choreograph an encounter between the user/viewer/listener and the online exhibition platform. I was inspired by a work on Koffler Digital titled *My mother tongue is burdened by the accent of exile* (2020) by Golboo Amani and collaborators Maryam Hafizirad and Mohammad Rezaei, curated by Letticia Cosbert Miller. The artwork is contextualized on Koffler Digital's website, which, via the prompt 'Enter Exhibition,' is linked to a minimalistic scrolling website that moves through text, audio and video across 6 'parts.'

My mother tongue is burdened by the accent of exile, can be considered as a single sound and video interactive artwork rather than a multi-artist curated exhibition in the vein of this research-creation; however, the narrative device of a website presented as a single scrolling page inspired the curation of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*. *My mother tongue is burdened by the accent of exile* is a visual and auditory recitation of the poem *Pariya* by Ahmad Shamlu as a response to the Iranian tradition of poetry as a tool for teaching language skills and cultural literacy. Following the poem's linear narrative through a single webpage—that a user can scroll through at their own pace—audio, video and written recitations are woven together. This online work follows the narrative flow of poetry, folding together multiple and different voices. This strategy of assembly through a movement from beginning to end seemed to echo a river's gathering flows as it meanders from its forming tributaries to its mouth.

The second and final iteration of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* became a single-page exhibition. The landing page of the website is the exhibition itself, with a scrolling wavy text featuring the exhibition's title and a right-justified black and white archival image of the channelized Lower Don River from 1948 (which I have edited by digitally drawing the path of the river's formerly meandering flow in a bright orange hue (fig. 17)). The original image was found through the Toronto Public Library Digital Archive and is an open source photo titled *Aerial view of the Don River from Bloor Street to Queen Street* published by the Toronto Star. Inspired by *My mother tongue is burdened by the accent of exile*, the exhibition's mise-en-scène reconsidered the presentation of audio works in a physical gallery space to embrace the potential of a website's unfolding.

Aesthetic and stylistic choices are never neutral. Using Squarespace's version 7.1 templates, which are all part of the same template family, I could work with existing layouts and paste and edit them on the website's exhibition page. The website's design is highly customizable; thus, I could make my own design choices, select specific fonts

and a limited colour palette of grey and orange. I chose a serif font, Inknut Antiqua (2014), for the headings and site title and a sans serif font, Brandon Grotesque (2010), for paragraphs and navigation tabs. Aesthetically, pairing a serif and sans serif font is standard in graphic design and creates visual harmony and distinction between the two types of written text. Inknut Antiqua is an Antiqua typeface designed by Claus Eggers Sørensen primarily used for literature and long-form text and was created to evoke Venetian incunabula, early books printed using metal type before the year 1500. The typeface is a modern reimagining of historical type, and its heavy weight still works well with tight leading making it well-suited to screen reading and web applications.[325] Inknut—called harad in Hindi—from which the typeface takes its name is a nut-like fruit that can be used for ink making. In contrast to the serif typeface, Brandon Grotesque is a geometric sans-serif typeface by German type designer Hannes von Döhren of HVD Fonts. Like Inknut Antiqua, it is also well suited to the web. Brandon Grotesque takes inspiration from geometric typefaces that originated in the 1920s.[326] Brandon Grotesque is clean, modern, and minimalistic, following the unifying circular form of early Grotesk typefaces like Erbar.

Figure 17

Screenshot of the landing page for *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*, 2022.

[325] Shelley Gruendler, "Typeface Review: Inknut Antiqua," Typographica, last modified March 19, 2015, https://typographica.org/typeface-reviews/inknut-antiqua/.
[326] Jeremiah Shoaf, "Brandon Grotesque," Typewolf, accessed September 23, 2022, https://www.typewolf.com/brandon-grotesque.

The colour scheme of the online exhibition was intentional, purposefully avoiding the use of a white background to prevent any reference or allusion to the traditional exhibitionary space of the white cube. Further, orange was selected as the secondary colour for text and accents. The colour orange draws up many common associations, such as warmth, sunshine, joy, and caution. The colour used in the online exhibition is vibrant but neutral, presenting a liminal in-betweenness, warmth but not too much, and attention but not too much. The colour was primarily selected as an opposite to blue—it sits directly across from blue on the colour wheel—as a direct departure from the (often) automatic use of blue (and sometimes green) in relation to imagery, art, and exhibitions connected to water and rivers. Green and blue have become a trope related to environmental and Land-based art and exhibitions, which in this instance I wanted to avoid. While defaults and templates abound in building a website, the basic foundations offer an opportunity to explore and consider (curatorially) the meaning and intention behind every creative decision.

Of course, only some things can be controlled or determined with an online exhibition. At the most basic level of consideration, each visitor to the online exhibition will use their unique hardware setup. They may use a phone of varying types, with which they may view the exhibition on-site at the Lower Don River or anywhere else in the world. Or, they may access the online exhibition from a desktop computer, iPad or another tablet from anywhere. With this in mind, "while staging an online exhibition, it is important to embrace the openness of the situation."[327] The curatorial aim must not be to control every possible instance of the encounter but to focus on the more considerable impact of the exhibition components "outside of a specific technological context."[328] Such an approach will embrace the performative nature of online exhibitions and all its affordances. In the instance of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*, desktop and mobile compatible versions were considered. Both versions present a scrolling narrative meandering between image, text, video and the three movements and their respective works. The main difference between the desktop and mobile versions is the orientation of text, image, and video, which is presented across a wider screen for a laptop or desktop computer and a much thinner, more vertically oriented screen on the mobile version. Both prioritize the user experience of moving through the exhibition from start to finish, allowing for pauses at any point, with guiding propositions that may either orient users on site of the Lower Don River or encourage them to imagine the river site from whatever other location they may be encountering the work. An online exhibition must be open to multiple and unknown modes of encounter.

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[327] Connor, "The Rules of the Game."
[328] Connor.

The three works in *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* are presented in their own slightly varied configurations, following the artworks form and desires of the artists. Danica's audio work is a five-part walk accompanied by an artist statement, reference image (the "River Don Straightening Plan," fig. 2, pg. 6) and transcript with accompanying audio description. Elijah's work is a single song accompanied by an artist's statement and transcript, and finally, Shelby's video diptych is presented as two side-by-side videos (one above the other for scale on the online version) accompanied by an artist's statement and guiding prompt suggesting how to best experience her work.

Connor, riffing on a definition of the exhibition as an "imposition of order on objects," suggests that, for online exhibitions, *arrangement* is a more suited term.[329] Arrangement is less strict and more open-ended than ordering, which is suited to the variability of the online exhibition. It also implies performativity—for Connor, one associated with musical arrangement—which can be connected to dramaturgy. Following the dramaturgical's compositional approach, each of the exhibition's 3 'acts' refers to a more focused theme and relates to a specific location on site. Act 1 begins with the history of the Don Improvement Project, the starting point for the exhibition's coming into being, considering the river's many lives over time and situating the listener in a long history of the Land.

Songs for the Narrows

Danica Evering's five-movement soundwalk is presented in *Act 1: Source* of the exhibition *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*. Before encountering Danica's soundwalk, audiences will scroll past an archival image I selected, taken by Yves Amelie in 1985, depicting the meandering Don River looking north, punctuated by bridges in the mid and foreground (fig. 18). This image reflects Danica's compositional structure, 5-parts, following the five bridges along the straightened and canalized Narrows.

Danica's soundwalk was composed along The Narrows of the lower river and reflects upon the river's pre-improvement state before 1886, the Don Improvement and the current state of the river's straightened path in 2022. The sounds in each of the five movements are varied, from trickling water to the whooshing of passing cyclists, to conversations of passersby, to bees, gulls and the hum of nearby traffic along the Don Valley Parkway. Danica recorded the sounds in her work on-site between 2019 and 2022 during various site visits; some she recorded alone, and others during our visits together. The soundscape of the Lower Don Trail is complex. As a meeting point, the river and green corridor intersect with a major transport artery and a much-loved

[329] Ibid.

walking and cycling trail. Danica captures this sonic complexity while encouraging the layering of experience by asking listeners to engage with the work through headphones that are not very soundproof or with just one earbud—allowing for other sounds to seep into the listening experience. Danica's suggestion encourages listeners to make new 'ecotones' and consider the relationship between sites and the space between the recordings and the listener.

Figure 18

Yves Amelie, Don River looking north, 1985. Image courtesy of the Toronto Public Library.

Danica's structure of five movements is inspired by an archival map of the River Don Straightening Plan. The same map inspired my early sketches of the river's path (fig. 2, pg. 6). The map, drawn up in 1888 by surveyors Unwin, Browne, and Sankey, depicts the Don River's meandering path, overlaid with the widened and straightened channel indicating the surrounding lands to be expropriated for the development of The Narrows. Five movements follow the five bridges on the map crossing the Don River at Winchester Street, Gerrard Street, Queen Street, Eastern Avenue, and the Grand Trunk Railway crossing just north of Front Street. The bridges, interventions that intersect with the canalized river, mark the listener's journey and the duration of each movement. However, Danica's soundwalk is not meant to be experienced in a prescriptive or exact

way; markers are loose and suggestive. An audio introduction prepares listeners for the experience of this soundwalk, outlining the history of the canalization of The Narrows for those who may not know about The Don Improvement. Danica guides listeners to begin by finding a safe place to listen "where diverted attention will not cause any danger" continuing, she suggests locating and following a single directional path (as opposed to a loop), "where you can move like a river towards a lake."[330] While the soundwalk was composed of histories and sounds from the Don River, the work can be experienced off-site at any "parallel sonic space" where water leads to a lake.

Movement 1, *Solo* (Riverdale Park Viaduct), opens with the river's solo, or descant, in music a voice above or removed from others, an independent treble melody. Danica alludes to the river's flow post-Don Improvement, describing the impact of settler colonial development and lust for progress as it imposed "a straight line, drawn onto the land as if with a ruler."[331] Following the concept of kinesthetic sympathy (also known as kinesthetic empathy) in dance, wherein spectators feel as though they are participating in the movement they are observing, Danica's soundwalk connects the listener's body to the river; "attention stretches towards—can listening be a choreography? Our ears reach out, yearning. As water curves and impacts—can we too?"[332] Then, exploring sound as mass, Danica considers the materiality of noise as a material thing—vibrations moving through space—that carries weight and can touch the listener. Watching the river's flow and embodying its movements while feeling the physicality of sound's 'touch,' Danica opens *Songs for the Narrows* by weaving a deeper connection between the river and the listener.

Movement 2, *Canon* (Gerrard Street Bridge), is a canon—in music, a counterpoint-based compositional technique that employs a melody with one or multiple imitations of the melody being played after a certain length of time—that speaks to the connection between the canalized river and parts of the river that were filled in to create its linear pathway. Using this compositional technique (canon), Danica moves between leader (original melody) and follower (imitative melody), echoing the river's "leading voice," which has been filled in and its following voice (the canal), which has been "hardened to stone."[333] This parallel between the composition and permutations of the river's path is further echoed by the overlay of the Don Valley Parkway. The Parkway, a following third voice that imitates the meander of the Don River and Valley, is described by roads and traffic commissioner Sam Cass, "the funny thing is we had to put those curves in it

[330] Danica Evering, "Movement 1: Solo," *Songs for the Narrows*, 2022. Soundwalk.
[331] Evering, "Movement 1: Solo."
[332] Evering, "Movement 1: Solo."
[333] Danica Evering, "Movement 2: Canon," *Songs for the Narrows*, 2022. Soundwalk.

because that's the way the Don Valley went," he continues, "years later traffic engineers discovered you should put curves on highways because otherwise drivers start to do silly things and drive too fast."[334] Danica recounts the colonial vision of the Parkway as a celebrated 'drivable park,' praised in the 1940s as a mode of communing with nature.[335] She critically invokes the dreams of Metropolitan Toronto Chair Frederick G. Gardiner or 'Big Daddy' Gardiner as "he drives the first car through untouched vistas, conquering them with his wheels. Behind his first car, traffic roars."[336] Stories of the layered following voices that have attempted to silence the meandering river's leading voice over more than a hundred years encourage the listener to search for the river's voice without claiming it; "*Here, the river divided around the first of many marshy islands, split and rejoined. A chorus of voices.*"[337]

Movement 3, *Interruption* (Dundas Street Bridge), narrates Danica's encounter with a fallen crane, which interrupts (her walk, the landscape, and people), coming to signify Toronto's "troubling reverence for revitalization."[338] Complicating the notion of improvement, Danica revisits the intentions and failures of the Don Improvement Plan as it sought to employ the river in the name of colonial development and failed. Recounting a site visit to the river to observe and gather recordings, she describes her encounter with a fallen crane blocking a city road in downtown Toronto. A metallic echo punctuates the hum of city traffic before Danica begins her narration over the sounds of birds in conversation. A parallel between the failed canalization of the Don River and the fallen "giant bird" is drawn. Construction cranes punctuate the city, blending into the cityscape of high-rises, while this particular crane disrupts the thrum of progress. In Movement 3, a rupture in the experience of the rapidly developing downtown core recasts 'improvement' as an interruption.

Movement 4, *Bow* (Queen Street Bridge), follows the parallel flows of the Don River and Don Valley Parkway. Danica tends to the overlapping sounds of rushing traffic and flowing water that builds tension between the valley and its development (DVP; The Narrows; Grand Trunk Railway). Gesturing to sound ecologist Andra McCartney's concept of "ecotones"—marginal zones where ecosystems (biological, sonic) overlap—Danica asks listeners to consider how place sounds overlap; as the vibrant hum of bees rub up against the deafening punch of a jackhammer. Moments of sonic ambiguity are

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[334] "Don Valley 'Parking Lot' hits milestone," Wheels.ca, last modified August 26, 2011, https://www.wheels.ca/news/don-valley-parking-lot-hits-milestone/.
[335] Dennis Duffy, "Historicist: How We Hyped the DVP," Torontoist, last modified September 3, 2016, https://torontoist.com/2016/09/historicist-how-we-talked-about-the-dvp/.
[336] Evering, "Movement 2: Canon."
[337] Evering.
[338] Danica Evering, "Artist Statement," *Songs for the Narrows*, 2022.

woven throughout Danica's soundwalk and even emerge in her accompanying audio description (which can be read on the exhibition website); is that "a toad (or a saw?)."[339]

In the final Movement, 5, *White Noise* (Lakeshore), Danica brings us to the river's mouth, where the rushing noises of vehicles along the Don Valley Parkway flow into the gurgle and burble of water culminating as the river "runs into green reeds at the lake's mouth."[340] Danica describes the river's vitality as it continues to refuse containment post-improvement through the naturally reoccurring floods caused by heavy rainfall. In the final movement, she folds in the Port Lands Revitalization Project, describing seeds that sprouted after a century covered by fill soil and moss, uncovered while digging for a new one-kilometre meandering mouth for the Don River, exposing the seeds to water and sunlight.[341] Hard Stem Bulrush and Cattails seeds were dormant for a century, resurging as a reminder of the landscape that was once ecologically diverse wetlands.[342] At the end of the soundwalk, we arrive at a speculative site, currently under construction until 2024. The sound of gulls emerge at Danica asks, "can you hear the lake"?

A harmony with the straight and narrow

Act 2: Meander follows with Elijah Harper's contribution to *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*, a soundscape that audiences on location will encounter at the base of the canalized Narrows nearby the Keating Channel.[343] The exhibition's second act speaks to the form of The Narrows and its relation to a colonial worldview. An archival image of the construction of the Keating Channel depicts the highly controlled and logical arrangement of the Don River's mouth. The canalization of the river is presented as a metaphor for the experience of growing up queer in a society that does not allow for difference or diversion.

Elijah's soundscape is a piece of music, an original composition featuring Elijah's voice-over introduction, piano and synth remixed with a collection of sampled sounds. The

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[339] Danica Evering, "Movement 4: Bow – Queen Street Bridge," *Songs for the Narrows*, 2022. Audio description.

[340] Evering, "Artist Statement."

[341] Formerly the ecologically diverse Ashbridge's Bay Marsh, the Port Lands were filled a century ago after becoming heavily polluted with sewage dumped into the Marsh. The Port Lands were filled with the end goal of creating an active industrial port for Toronto which never materialized.

[342] Jessica Mundie, "Century-old seeds sprout again in Toronto's Port Lands," National Post, last modified April 24, 2022, https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/century-old-seeds-sprout-again-in-torontos-port-lands.

[343] This soundscape, inspired by and connected to a specific place, can be experienced anywhere. This potential was considered because the user's experience of an online exhibition cannot be predicted or controlled.

Don River articulates Elijah's experience trying to express his queer identity through its 'straightened' form. The river's *straightening* mirrors Elijah's struggle to break with the controlling limits of societal norms and expectations. The inability to freely express oneself, to be more than the normative trajectory of a life lived under heteronormative colonial control, is, for Elijah, echoed in the river's punished flow that moves straight down *The Narrows*.

Elijah's rhythmic work evokes an embodied experience that will be unique to each listener, dependent on their identity, experiences of urban public space and the tempo with which they move through the city.[344] Through our collective walks and conversations along The Narrows of the Lower Don River, Elijah was inspired to create a soundscape that would translate his experience of coming to and finding a relationship with the river. The history of the canalization of the lower river, its straightening and transformation into The Narrows via the Don Improvement Project, parallels Elijah's experience of 'straightening'; the control, punishment and discipline for not 'fitting in' as straight. Elijah illustrates the dark history of colonial control in a quest to tame and divert the river's flow as it reflects his life growing up queer. Merging an "urban/hip-hop flare"[345] with electronic and classical elements, Elijah takes listeners on his journey biking down to the river and experiencing the highly-altered landscape, capturing the urban experience of Toronto, the softness of the water's calming flow and the tragic history of The Don Improvement Project.

The soundscape sits in a minor key, A Minor, with a simple chord progression for the main synth revolving around a 4-bar loop.[346] Following the hip-hop tradition, the soundscape's BPM (beats per minute) is slowed to 90 BPM, while the classical introduction is not grounded in a constant BPM to disrupt a more traditional musical flow and create anticipation for the listener. A play between classical and electronic elements is woven throughout Elijah's soundscape, building tension between past and present influences; illustrating a before and after for the river's flows (pre- and post-Don Improvement). The opening's classical piano, played by Elijah, sets the stage for a voice-over describing his encounter with the river; "as the cars pass, I take a deep inhale and let my exhale match the wind through the trees. Synching sounds. Then I heard the river in song and harmony."[347]

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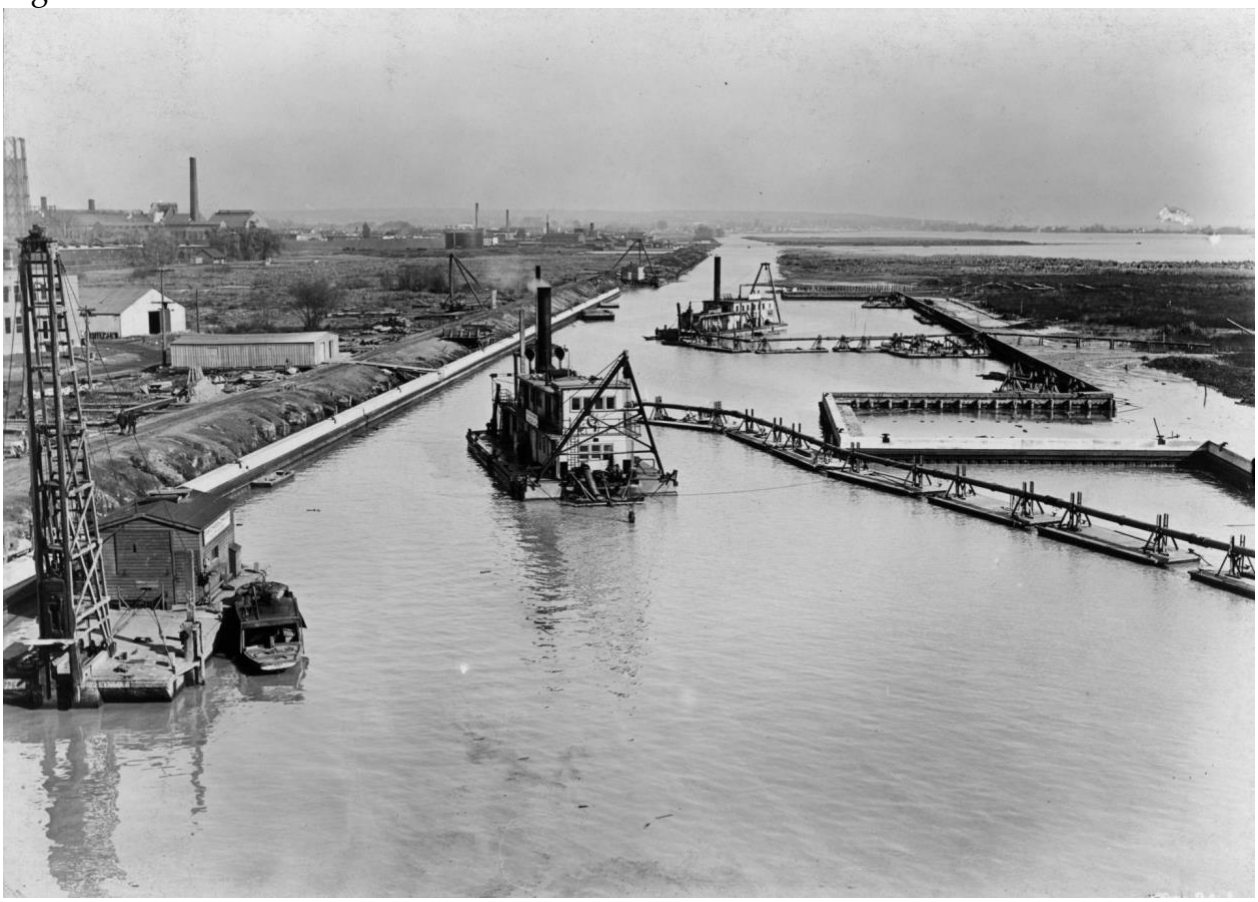
[344] Springgay and Truman outline the importance of rhythm for walking researchers; "rhythm is described through embodied accounts of moving and sensory expressions of feet, limbs, and breath. In other instances, rhythm pertains to the city's pulse, such as traffic, crowds, music, and other environmental phenomena that press on a walker." Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 5.
[345] Elijah Harper, Email message to author, October 7, 2022.
[346] Harper, Email, October 7, 2022.
[347] Elijah Harper, *A harmony with the straight and narrow*, 2022.

Figure 19



Keating Channel looking east during construction, 1914. Image courtesy of the Toronto Public Library.

Elijah's soundscape is best experienced with headphones. He employs mid-side processing to ensure the river sounds are always foregrounded with an equal volume in the left and right ear while the ambient noises of the soundscape constantly transition between left and right, making them difficult to locate spatially. Ambient noises are "intentionally mixed out of focus from the listener"[348] to suggest an experience of sonic layering, evoking an encounter with the Lower Don River and Valley's multitudinous sounds (construction, conversations, animals, river, bicycles, and car traffic of the parallel Parkway). Some of the ambient sounds used by Elijah were retrieved from YouTube. The soundscape further incorporates Elijah's piano, acoustic bass, strings, synth beat (using MIDI and .VSTs), and resampled recording of his voice for some "Ahhs!" Multiple sound strata illustrate layered histories of the river's landscape and Elijah's queer mixed-Jamaican hybrid identity.

[348] Harper, Email, October 7, 2022.

In collaboration with his original sound design and piano, Elijah uses the strategy of sampling from various sounds of river recordings and videos of Toronto police sirens on YouTube to craft a storied encounter between his experience, the listener, and the highly altered landscape of the post-industrial lower river. Following the influence of hip-hop, Elijah's process references the histories of remix culture. Since at least the middle of the 2000s, following the development and ease of peer-to-peer file sharing, the remix has become a tool and widely used concept in music, visual art, literature and video.[349] For hip-hop scholar Mark V. Campbell "the remix…functions within Black diasporic cultural production as a technology that can reframe some of the dominant ways in which Western culture extracts exchange and surplus value from Black cultural production."[350] Thinking differently about the production and commodification of culture, remix strategically evades intellectual copyright battles, "open[ing] the relational possibilities that legal structures and consumption habits close down."[351] Elijah's layered soundscape tells a dark and shared experience of queerness between himself and the river, following the critical strategy of sampling and remixing. *A harmony with the straight and narrow*, the second act of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still*, takes listeners to a place of tragedy, narrating settler-colonial desires to control, stifle and 'straighten.' Following Elijah's soundscape, based at the end of canalized The Narrows, Shelby Lisk's video diptych offers a more hopeful narrative of water's ability to remember and reclaim its natural flows.

All that will remain

Shelby Lisk's video diptych *All that will remain* was folded into the exhibition during the final stages of its composition. After meeting by chance at the Institute for Curatorial Inquiry at Agnes Etherington in Kingston, we began a conversation about her work, and the exhibition *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still.* Since Danica and I began collaborating in 2019, the landscape of the Lower Don River, particularly the river's mouth at the Keating Channel and Port Lands, has been radically altered. The exhibition has emerged through a shifting landscape, and a new context at the river's mouth had yet to be accounted for during the exhibition's coming into being. The mouth of the Don River looks like a dystopian cityscape; the elevated Gardiner Expressway ends abruptly in the sky,[352] mounds of excavated fill soil and construction equipment

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[349] Mark V. Campbell, "The Grung: Indigenous & Afrodiasporic Ruptures in the Hip-hop Archive," in *Other Places: Reflections on Media Arts in Canada*, ed. Deanna Bowen (Toronto: Public, 2019), 402.
[350] Campbell, "The Grung," 403.
[351] Campbell, 403.
[352] The Gardiner Expressway & Lake Shore Boulevard East Reconfiguration has removed and plans to rebuild the Expressway from Cherry Street to just east of the Don Valley Parkway at Logan Avenue, including a new Gardiner-DVP connection. This massive project, aligned to the Port Lands Revitalization and Flood Protection, is part of a multi-year city initiative to "revitalize the Waterfront, reconnect the city

populate the Port Lands, and gates cordoned off multiple construction sites that are no longer accessible to the public (fig. 20). With Elijah's soundscape previously culminating the exhibition at the detritus of the river's mouth, looking out upon the mid-construction Port Lands, I felt that Shelby's video work—as the final 'act' of the exhibition—would offer a more ecologically hopeful gesture towards the possible futures of this highly developed and modified landscape. *All that will remain* illustrates the idea that nature will always return to its pre-developed state; the river will find a way to its meandering path by flood and destruction of the river's canal.[353]

Figure 20

Construction at the mouth of the Don River, October 2, 2021.

Shelby's work is contextualized by an image of the proposed landscape of the Port Lands Revitalization and Flood Protection that I have edited by rendering it in black and grey (to follow the aesthetic of the earlier images in the exhibition) and drawn in orange (to follow the earlier drawing on the image of the *Aerial view of the Don River from Bloor*

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with the Lake, balance different modes of travel" (pedestrian, cycle, rail, and car), achieve sustainability and create value. "Gardiner Expressway & Lake Shore Boulevard East Reconfiguration," City of Toronto, accessed October 7, 2022, https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/streets-parking-transportation/road-maintenance/bridges-and-expressways/expressways/gardiner-expressway/gardiner-expressway-rehabilitation-strategy/gardiner-expressway-east-reconfiguration/.

[353] With the caveat that flooding and climate change more generally, disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, colonized, racialized and poor people and thus floods are not framed as a form of poetic justice but rather as water's memory, "voice and agency" and as a "truth-teller." Céline Chuang, "What the River Reveals: Remembering Like the Water," *The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* 13 (September 2022): 5.

Street to Queen Street which opens the exhibition [figure 17, pg. 103]) the pathway of the new excavated meandering river mouth to be completed in 2024 (fig. 21).

Figure 21

Edited image of the future Villiers Island Park, 2022.

Shelby's video diptych is presented as two separate videos with a prompt asking the audience to play both videos simultaneously, not necessarily in exact synch. The first video, *Tension*, depicts Shelby gathering sand on the shores of Toronto Island (formerly Hiwatha Island) in Lake Ontario (formerly Lake Iroquois). In the video, her hands disturb and gather the sand, representing a colonial desire to control the natural environment. Shelby suggests that this gesture illustrates "our arrogance as human beings to think that we can even affect the earth" through a settler worldview; she continues, in opposition, "Indigenous people work *with* the land, not against it."[354] The second video, *Erasure*, follows the gathered sand's reclamation by water lapping against the shore, expressing the eventual futility of trying to harness and control the Land and water. While *Tension* is viewed in real-time, *Erasure* had to be drastically sped up to match the video lengths. The videos looped in harmony on the exhibition's website mirror the timescales of human intervention and nature's reclamation. *Tension*, a stand-in for human interventionist projects like The Don Improvement, the Keating Channel and today the Port Lands Revitalization and Flood Protection Project, takes place over a

[354] Shelby Lisk, Google Document sent to author, October 11, 2022.

short time, just as the Don River has come to be so highly mediated in just over 130 years. *Erasure* shows us the timescale of water's memory; the process is much slower, but water will always find a way.

All that will remain teaches us that the Land knows best how to regulate and maintain itself. Floods are inevitable, and human interventions cannot prevent them. Speaking to water's memory, Céline Chuang describes, "water is already at work remembering, destabilizing unjust foundations, steeping soil and seeding life."[355] Shelby's video work clarifies the poetic injustice of the Don River's history of development and control. A river that was once straightened and canalized to harness its capacity to seed life and control its floods is now being redeveloped, over 130 years later, into a meandering urban island river that will create a picturesque landscape for new parks, condos and development. City planners now know that the meander, not the canal, is the best flood protection and a plan to manufacture this form through the 'revitalized' Port Lands fill site is just another mode of controlling the landscape, harnessing the ancient knowledge of the Land. Shelby's work intercedes into the narrative of progress as a manufactured, and highly regulated 'return to nature' through the Port Lands proposal. Describing the fatality of the colonial desire to control and harness water, Chuang tells us, "in this history of water, the ground is porous, and walls are always constructed, never inherent. To remember that such walls (and by extension, other carceral systems like prisons and borders) require relentless fortification to quell the flow of life is to invoke their eventual impermanence."[356]

Learning from water's memory, Shelby's work asks us to consider what it means to be in relation. When we know everything is related—as Shelby describes, "the moon is our Grandmother, the sun is our Elder Brother, the thunderers are our uncles"—then we can understand that we must mutually care for and protect all things as they care for and protect us.[357] Shelby shared her knowledge with me as it inspired the creation of *All that will remain*:

> We [Mohawk people] don't have one creator. Everything is a creator: the moon, the sun, the thunderers, the bugs, the plants, everything is a creator, everything creates something that we need to survive, but many of us have forgotten our relationship to all of creation. As Mohawk people, we are supposed to hear 'the words before all else' [Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen] as the very first words spoken to us when we are born. Those are our original instructions. They teach us to give

[355] Chuang, "What the River Reveals," 6.
[356] Chuang, "What the River Reveals," 5.
[357] Lisk, Google Document.

> thanks for all that creation gives to us and to live in reciprocity with the earth. This is why all of our ceremonies are based upon thanking the earth for providing for us yet again each season and cycle. We are constantly in a relationship with everything; even if we do nothing, that is the relationship we create.[358]

Looking upon all the destruction at the base of the Don River's mouth and Port Lands fill site—currently upended by construction equipment hauling massive amounts of excavated fill lands to build a new meandering river mouth—Shelby's video diptych brings hope in the face of climate devastation, no matter what "the land will have the last word, on its own time."[359]

Following research-creation as a process that is continually unfolding, the exhibition ends with my short recording titled *An end, and a continuation*. A few lines of text culminate the exhibition while gesturing toward possible futures for the highly mediated landscape of the Lower Don River; "the meander shall lap up and erode where the walls of 'improvement' rise."[360] Further, listeners are asked to consider their relationship to the Land and how place names can affect these relations. As this project comes to a close, I continue to learn from the Lower River and my expression of the meander as a model for the research-creation curatorial process.

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[358] Lisk, Google Document.

[359] Rita Wong, "What I learned about violence in BC's Peace Valley," *Canada's National Observer*, July 30, 2020, https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/07/30/opinion/what-i-learned-about-violence-bcs-peace-valley.

[360] Treva Pullen-Legassie, *An end, a continuation*, 2022.

Conclusion
An end, a continuation

> It is night. Wind murmurs past each branch and brush of grass. Below, before, the river begins a slow solo. After a sharp turn, it evens out straight, and then a wide curve. Can you hear it?
> —Danica Evering, *Songs for The Narrows*

On October 23, 2022, with the online exhibition recently completed, Danica and I ventured to the Lower Don River to experience the work on location for the first time. Beginning at the Riverdale Park Viaduct, we walked north to a small opening between the trail and river, where we listened to the Land Acknowledgment together. We then walked about 20 feet further north to the red weathered bridge crossing the river where we listened—standing on the bridge looking south to the canalized Don and the many bridges crossing the river, and north towards the meandering flow of the unaltered river—to Danica's 'Introduction' to her work *Songs for the Narrows*. Continuing, we returned south to the Riverdale Park Viaduct where, under the bridge, we began listening and walking south to Movement 1, *Solo* (Riverdale Park Viaduct). The timing of Danica's work aligned perfectly, and the experience of listening to her soundwalk with one earbud amongst the lively soundscape of the lower river was magical. A natural call and response emerged; a roaring engine in Danica's work was echoed by another from the Parkway. A bike passing by was mirrored by one of Danica's recordings. Synchronicities abound. The work was brought to life in concert with place.

We continued, stopping for a quick reflection after each 'Movement' and celebrating this moment, so long in the making and thus so rich with our shared connection to the changing landscape since 2019. A longer pause between Movement 4, *Bow* at the Queen Street Bridge and Movement 5, *White Noise* at the Lakeshore offered a welcome moment to reflect and take in the sounds of the Land through an attuned ear. As we came to the Cherry Street Bridge, we were met with a large diamond-shaped orange sign reading: TRAIL CLOSED AHEAD. JANUARY 2022 - DECEMBER 2023. Under the bridge, a fence blocked off the remainder of the Lower Don Trail heading south. The detritus of the trail reconstruction expanded beyond our view. Continuing in the tradition of this project, and the necessary meandering process, a disruption to the planned experience of the exhibition emerged at its 'end.' At the moment, Danica and I did our best to adapt and temporarily recontextualize the work. We discussed reworking the location for her 5th and final 'Movement' (formerly the Lakeshore), which will, for the time being, be experienced further up the trail right after the 4th Movement. We found a mini clearing just before the Cherry Street Bridge for audiences to experience Elijah's soundscape and an area with a view of the base of the river's canal to watch Shelby's video. Though the

intended experience is impossible, new relations and imaginaries are being formed. The temporary location for Elijah's soundscape offers a gorgeous view of the Toronto skyline, inflecting a more expansive scene through which to relate to his queer experience in the city at large. Shelby's video will, for the time being, still be connected to a view of the water and construction, a small opening where a sandy shore is exposed along The Narrows with ample places to sit on a cluster of rocks.

Working through a global pandemic, like working in a 'site-specific' context, requires an openness to disruption. I cannot control the larger forces at play: environmental, infrastructural, and political. Following the meander, disruption needn't mark an end but rather an opening unto variation; to multiple and new possibilities. The entirety of this research-creation curatorial process prepared me to take this literal roadblock in stride, allowing for the emergence of another path of experience in an already open and adaptable exhibitionary context (online). After returning home and sharing the news with my other collaborators, Elijah and Shelby, I made a few minor updates to the exhibition, including a note—on Danica's 4th Movement—to contextualize this disruption and a temporary experience for those experiencing the works in situ until construction is completed in December 2023:

> *Note: if you are experiencing this exhibition before December 2023, the Lower Don Trail is closed south of Cherry Street, disrupting the intended path of experience. If this is the case, begin Evering's 5th movement, 'White Noise — Lakeshore,' right after the 4th movement. Following Evering's soundwalk, listen to Harper's soundscape in the small clearing just north of the Cherry Street bridge and watch Lisk's video diptych while sitting on one of the many large rocks where you can see the sandy riverbank below.*

The emergent and unknowable curatorial process of *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* stayed with the river as a guide, allowing for an expression of research-creation as 'artful;' valuing the process or 'the way' rather than holding on to a final vision (which was impossible under the conditions of a global pandemic). Traversing down a river, following the ebbs and flows of the meander, the path is indeterminate; like research-creation, which does not know itself in advance. We cannot see the river's mouth around curves and bends, and thus we don't know where the process ends. The journey is slow, undulating back and forth as opposed to barreling down a straight canal, allowing us to tend to the conditions of the moment. There is time for risk and failure, and value is not measured by deadlines but by deep learning, collective knowledge-building and transformation. Working through precarity, research-creation—as allied to the minor—carves out space for the continued (re)invention of improvisational forms and modes of expression. Not knowing leaves

room for the cultivation of new processes, thoughts and potentials in excess of what could have been predicted.

At the time of this writing, the exhibition *improvement becomes a wall, and the river meanders still* is fully formed; however, its future potentials remain unknown. As it has been framed throughout this dissertation, research-creation takes unpredicted (or unpredictable) circumstances as an opening unto new as-of-yet-unknown possibilities. I intend to revisit the exhibition after December 2023, when the Lower Don Trail has re-opened. I plan to approach a local gallery or artist-run centre to help share the exhibition more widely and support its continuation by programming public encounters with the work (walks, curator and artist talks in situ). Within our current context, wherein gathering outside is again possible and safe, there is so much potential in exploring the collective experience of the work. After Danica and I had the opportunity to encounter the exhibition together on location I was struck by the affective intensity of walking in partnership as a practice, a means to negotiate flow (as discussed in Chapter 2), where we experienced both the synchronous movements of our bodies and further between the artworks and Land. While walking and engaging with the exhibition a respectful listening practice is invented. The constellation of the urban-natural sonic tapestry weaves together with the works. The methodologies that came to inform this curatorial process were echoed in how the exhibition itself structures an experience on site; "guest listening," walking, and meandering along with the ever-unfolding conditions of the event.

In the future, I envision a collective public walk along the Lower Don Trail in the Spring of 2024. Re-opening the new Lower Don Trail will also mark the completion of the Port Lands Flood Protection and Revitalization Project. A new context will seed new, presently unknowable commentaries and relations. Shelby's work, viewed at the mouth of the Don River, will then overlook the newly constructed meander through the former Port Lands fill site. The image of the proposed Villiers Island (fig. 16, pg. 94) will then be a reality. What new effects will emerge from the relationship between Shelby's *All that will remain* and the completed idyllic shore-side village?

Research-creation is speculative and event-oriented.[361] It destabilizes the long-held modes of university knowledge mobilization.[362] When life was radically disrupted in March 2020—derailing my doctoral work and rendering this exhibition unknowable—the techniques of research-creation allowed for its continuation. When universities, libraries and archives closed, my practice continued. For Manning, research-creation

[361] Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 83.
[362] Erin Manning, *For A Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 221.

"asks what (other) forms learning can take."[363] By way of the abrupt arrival of global precarity (because of the COVID-19 pandemic), this research-creation's resilience fully expresses its process-led, decolonial,[364] curious, polydisciplineamorous,[365] artful[366] and speculative[367] force.

Diversions within a river's meandering course or a curatorial research-creation process are not hindrances. Water teaches "a language of freedom and fluidity, softness and solidarity, communion and treaty."[368] Wonscotonach (The Don River) has taught me so much since I was a child. Chuang recounts the impacts of following water's knowledge:

> To me, part of the call to decolonize is a call to remember like the water. Collectively retrieving forgotten befores is a political and life-giving act, one that can help non-Native people like me in unlearning loyalty to a singular history. Remembering like water complicates the colonial "past" and rescribes present and multivalent futures, forming—or re-forming—relations with what is still present and bubbling up from below.[369]

Before *The Narrows*, Wonscotonach meandered from the gathering of its tributaries to its marshy mouth flowing into the Bay. This research-creation offers a critical (re)reading of colonial notions of 'improvement,' wherein rivers are seen as facilitators of progress to be controlled, straightened, and canalized. Through the curatorial process, I was guided by water; to learn multiple and other histories that 'bubble up from below;' to follow the technique of ebb and flow, and embrace the unknown behind each bend; and finally, that walls appearing to contain or control a process always have a crack. An end, a continuation.

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[363] Manning, *Pragmatics*, 221.
[364] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 47.
[365] Loveless, *Manifesto for Research-Creation*, 70.
[366] Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 28.
[367] Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 14.
[368] Chuang, "What the River Reveals," 4.
[369] Chuang, 5.

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INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

The river meanders still:
Curation as research-creation for an unknowable exhibition

Researcher: Treva Legassie, PhD Candidate, Communication Studies
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Faculty Supervisor: Monika Gagnon, Professor, Communication Studies
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Source of funding for the study: TBD

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of the research is to explore the potential of virtual (web-based) site-specific public art to activate public spaces at the margins, looking to curatorial practice as a research-creation method in order to work-with the existing environment and infrastructure of the River Street Bridge located along the Lower Don Valley Trail in Toronto/Tkaronto. This practice-led dissertation will question how art can help us to inhabit an urban wild site; to look at how art can help to research the histories of the site and to examine how a web-based curated exhibition will impact the public's understanding of the social, political and ecological past, present and potential future of this indeterminate site.

B. PROCEDURES

You will work alongside primary curator/researcher, Treva Legassie, as an artist-collaborator on her doctoral project. As the artist participant, you will be responsible for producing a work of art that speaks to the River Street Bridge on the Lower Don Valley Trail. This work will be exhibited on a dedicated exhibition website. This work will be produced in consultation and collaboration with the curator. The curator will support the artist's work through research, project funding and the payment of appropriate current CARFAC fees (Category I, 3 (three) artist group exhibition), promotion and coordination of the exhibition event and the development and curation of a web-based exhibition. The curator/researcher will be documenting the process of curating the exhibition and may take notes, video and audio recordings of Zoom/telephone conversations and in-person interactions on site between artist and curator at the artist's discretion in order to analyze this process for her PhD research and dissertation.

The artist will retain copyright of the work included in the exhibition and will be acknowledged as the creator of the work in all materials related to the exhibition. The artist permits the curator to allow media representatives to photograph, televise or reproduce in any media the art works within the digital exhibition for the purpose of promoting the exhibition only and the curator will advise the artist of such activities. The artist permits the curator to use images of artworks in the exhibition for scholarly purposes related to her PhD degree and in a curatorial portfolio.

In total, participating in this study will take one year of engagement in the project. Your participation is limited by your personal availability and may differ between artist participants depending on the works proposed for the final exhibition and the availability of artists.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

Potential risks include: The web-based exhibition will be hosted and maintained online by the primary researcher, however, the artist will be responsible for keeping a copy of their work in the event that the web-based exhibition becomes obsolete or is taken down. The primary researcher will pay hosting fees and maintain the website for a minimum of 3 years after the exhibition date (until September 2024).

Potential benefits include: The public exhibition of your work, including the promotion of the exhibition event and assistance with the development and exhibition of your work through a dedicated curated web-based exhibition. You will have the benefit of exhibiting your work in a publicized web-based exhibition that will be promoted within arts communities in Toronto/Tkaronto and Montreal/Tiohtià:ke. You will have the opportunity to engage with a broad network and will receive guidance and consultation from the curator/researcher Treva Legassie in the development and exhibition of your work.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will gather the following information as part of this research: video, audio and written documentation of Zoom and telephone conversations and in-person interactions on-site between artist and curator. Any interaction that has been recorded in which the artist does not feel comfortable will be deleted. Any interaction the artist would like to keep private will not be recorded.

We will not allow anyone to access the information, except people directly involved in conducting the research. We will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form.

The information gathered will be identifiable. That means it will have your name directly on it.

Information gathered will be used by the primary researcher to reflect on the curatorial process and interactions between curator and artist in the making of the exhibition. Contents of the documentation may be quoted in the primary researcher's dissertation, with the consent of the artist.

We will protect the information by keeping all documentation secured in designated notebooks and/or on a hard drive. These will be accessible to the curator/research during the project and for five years following in order for her to write her dissertation. After this time, the documentation will be kept locked in the research supervisor's office.

We will destroy the information five years after the end of the study.

F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time before May 1st, 2021. If you decide that you don't want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher before May 1st, 2021. Participants will not be able to withdraw from the exhibition after May 1st, 2021 except in extreme circumstances and with adequate reasoning as the research project is dependent upon the exhibition of their work in the final research-creation curatorial project.

As a compensatory indemnity for participating in this research, you will receive the current CARFAC minimum royalty for a 3 (three) artist group exhibition (Category I). If you withdraw before the end of the research, you will receive 50% of the CARFAC minimum royalty for a 3 (three) artist group exhibition (Category I).

To make sure that research money is being spent properly, auditors from Concordia or outside will have access to a coded list of participants. It will not be possible to identify you from this list.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, or withdrawing your participation before May 1st, 2021.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print)_____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

(impressionism becomes a wall, and the silver meanders still...

ecomes a wa d t

Here, wherever you may be, is where you begin your journey through the Lower Don Valley. Here, you'll find yourself in the wonderful 'Work' by **Damian Ewering**, **Elijah Harper** and **Shelley Lisk** (presented as a single scrolling page curated by **Tessa Pullen-Lagunis**. You may experience the exhibition while walking The Harness of the Lower Don River Trail in etcetera. If you are on the Don River, begin your journey on the Lower Don Trail below the Riverdale Park Viaduct. Follow the guiding compass and map to orient yourself. Scroll slowly.

If you are on the Don River, walk north from the mouth of the Riverdale Park Viaduct, and at about 1 km about 500 feet, until you come to a small opening between the reed and the river on your right. Here, or from anywhere, find a place to stand and listen.

Local Soundscape(mono) 0:00/0:00

Read the Land Acknowledgement

Act 1: *Source*

If you are at the Lower Don River Mouth yourself standing at the centre of the weathered rail bridge—just about 20 feet north of the pillar where you stopped to acknowledge the land on the intersection between the flowing meander of Wauwatosa's River (Don River) and the straightened channel of The Harness, if you are elsewhere, find yourself at a tree or other waterbody or comparable.

Act 1 speaks to the many permutations of Wauwatosa's/Toronto River. Long before settlers sought to 'improve' the river by straightening and widening it into a tunnel (named Wauwatosa) nowadays, in ancient times, the Lower Don River and Valley was part of the prehistoric ginglymus Lake Iroquois and even earlier to the Pleistocene epoch the Laurentide Glacier, which covered present-day Toronto and helped shape the hills and valleys we know.

Songs for the Narrows

Danica Ewering

Songs for the Narrows is a classic soundwalk featuring a six-film segment musical composition. Recordings were gathered from the Don Valley Trail and Lower Don River, and the composition was created in the 1980s Don Improvement Plan in "what" (our mixing gathered sonic ballast) to map our historical and transitioning flowing narrows (or lack thereof). The river's meandering curves were straightened, widened, deepened into a single concrete-lined channel. It didn't work.

Five movements echo a map of the River Trail (beginning/end). Plus, reflecting the river's pre-improvement state in 1890 and its current transitioning state, there are two "ghost" movements. Each movement is a combination of field recordings, synthesizers, and instrument straightened/widened, recorded in our local spaces. Movement 3 is a cover about following and taking between the concrete channel and part of the river that was filled in. In Movement 3, a fallen crane interrupts as a sign of the city's troubling waterways for revitalization. For Movement 4, the river runs up against the road that is busy, distant traffic. Movement 5 closes the composition with calling wave where the river runs into green needs at the lake mouth.

The soundwalk is meant to be learnt in multiple sessions, allowing the soundscape/music the listener/reader is walking through to blend into memory. Walk and listen at your own pace. *If you are walking the Lower Don Trail, watch the start of each movement with the corresponding bridge overhead.*

1. Introduction 0:00/0:00 Download
2. Little - Riverside Park Viaduct 0:00/0:00 Download
3. Linear - Carrying Crane Bridge 0:00/0:00 Download
4. Interrupter - Dundas Street Bridge 0:00/0:00 Download
5. Rise - Queen Street Bridge 0:00/0:00 Download
6. Wave Noise - Lakeshore 0:00/0:00 Download

Read the soundtrack and audio descriptions

Act 2: *Meander*

If you are or location you will find yourself, than to the mouth of the Don River, somewhere along the southernmost point of the Lower Don Trail. If you are elsewhere, imagine a city's relationship to its waterways. You may think about Toronto, or another city. Sunnyside (Montreal, QC), Kalamazoo (Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA). What is your relation to water?

Act 2 interrogates the colonial desire to tame bodies + water, human — that do not follow a 'straightened' trajectory. Here the constitution of the Don River finds a parallel with the queer experience of self-discovery in a landscape that seeks to control and discipline. The Don River was straightened, widened and deepened and most days the water trickles slowly carrying little life, as it once did before 'improvements' polluted and poisoned the Don.

A harmony with the straight and narrow

Elijah Harper

The mouth of The Harness is a highly modified landscape, the straightened canal leads water out to the lake by way of the Keating Channel. The concrete plinth of the Gardiner Expressway looks large. What was once lush and messy meandered is now a highly ordered and controlled place. A harmony with the straight and narrow is a psychologic artifact in relation to the lower of the unaltered Harness of the Don River, activating its connection to the river, a shared history of not fitting into a 'straight line' and the destruction that succeeds. A play between classical and electronic elements is woven throughout, building a tension between past and present influences, illustrating a before and after for the river's flows (pre- and post- Don Improvement).

A collection of sounds—original piano and sound design, river recordings, and sampled videos of Toronto police crews from YouTube—crafts a storied accounting of continuating with the highly altered landscape of the post-industrial lower river. A shared experience of appropriation, between the river and listener, is woven together to a cyclically synth beat. The Don River's form—to remember that has been prioritized into a straight concrete liner—reflects the experience of growing up queer. A harmony with the straight and narrow verifies the pain and anxiety needed for a colonial desire to tame, control, and use bodies of water and human bodies that exceed the bounds of binaries and normative identities.

While listening you may choose to walk, sit, or dance to bridge a connection between your own body and the Don River.

A Harmony with the straight & narrow 0:00/0:00 Download

Read the soundscape manuscript

Act 3: *Mouth*

If you are or location you will find yourself on somewhere along the mouth of the Don River looking out upon the Port Lands mid-construction. Location is place where you sit at dusk, preferably where you can see or hear the lake.

Act 3 speaks to the knowledge that water carries and the future of the river's mouth. Wauwatosa's/Toronto's mouth was once ecologically diverse marshy lowlands protected by a peninsula now known as the Toronto Islands. Today, the river's mouth is encased in concrete (barring weed and invasive species growth). The Port Lands is undergoing major construction. Toronto is claiming of vast acreage of flooding—meaning the industrial waterways. The 1890s Don Improvement Plan was a precursor to Toronto's Waterfront Revitalization, which is currently the largest industrial development that it (Metro Toronto) has ever undertaken. Act 3 ponders how Toronto's waterfront is being shaped by the forces of progress. Water remains the phoenix. Future will rise in, and was displaced.

Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Flood' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.

Alex Wilson-Lynch

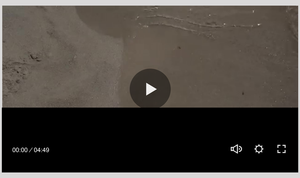
All that will remain

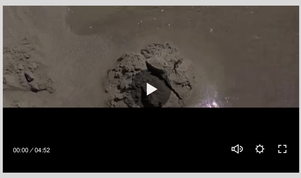
Shelby Lisk

Today, the 'Port Lands Flood Protection Project' will re-naturalize the river's mouth, adding a human-made meander that will traverse through the formerly industrial Port Lands leading the Don River out into Lake Ontario. Hindsight shows us that the river's meander was essential for maintaining the watershed and preventing flood damage at the river's mouth. In the years to come The Narrows will be buttressed by meanders on both its North and South ends.

The video diptych *All that will remain* speaks to the power of nature to return to a time before colonial visions proclaimed to know better (they did not). If colonization is about control, containing and constraining the natural state of things, then water may be its opposite, cleansing, releasing, remembering, eroding, constantly moving back into its most natural and fullest expression. Once the canalization of the lower river (the Don Improvement Plan), followed by the Keating Channel, and today the dredging of a new meandering river mouth (the Port Lands Flood Protection), plans to protect the city from flooding by the river's waters have long taken an interventionist approach. There has been a failure to notice that these plans also stunt the natural state of the water. Gathering sand on the shores of Toronto Island (formerly Hiwatha Island) in Lake Ontario (formerly Lake Iroquois) is a futile effort, the small structure that is built is reclaimed by water. *Tension* follows the manipulation of sand in real time while *Erasure* is sped up significantly to match the temporality of human intervention. Water will always remember in its own time, a period we may not be able to imagine or understand. Taking in *All that will remain* amongst the ruins of the Port Lands – currently mid-revitalization – consider the memory of the meander, the interventions upon these lands and waters by human hands, and what the water holds in its memory.

If you are watching from a desktop computer press play on both videos together, they needn't be perfectly in sync. If you are watching from a mobile phone play the videos one at a time, in any order. Find a rhythm between construction and water's inevitable flow.





As you return to the rhythms of your day, express gratitude by giving thanks to the Land.

An end, a continuation
Treva Legassie
Download

Read the transcript

Artist's bios:

Danica Evering was born in Cobourg and lives in Hamilton. With writing and sound composition, she works through spaces and people and power and memories. Her SSHRC-supported MA in Media Studies from Concordia University questions power dynamics and insider/outsider relationships in social practice through interviews with artists and creative analysis of her own field work. Evering's semi-fictional writing has taken the form of audio descriptions, sculptural biographies, soundwalks, and an experimental play. Her writing has appeared in Off Centre, No More Potlucks, Lemon Hound, Public, and other publications. She was a founding member if the editorial collective of Publication Studio Guelph, a sibling studio of an international publishing network that attends to the social lives of books, and participated in the creation and development of the Benčić Youth Council, a radical arts education program for youth in Rijeka, Croatia.

danicaevering.com

Elijah Harper is a pianist, beat-maker and synth-pop producer in Toronto, born and raised in Scarborough, Ontario. Influenced by his LGBTQ2+ identity and Jamaican roots, Harper's work takes up remixing and the synthesis of classical and contemporary sound to question, and dismantle, established hierarchies and power structures. By way of sampling and instrumentation, his sonic practice lends itself to story telling rooted in his personal connections to people and places. Elijah's work takes the form of music, lyrical storytelling, soundscapes and soundwalks.

@e_harpminor

Shelby Lisk is a multidisciplinary artist, filmmaker, and photographer from Kenhtè:ke (Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory). She completed her degree in Fine Arts, with a minor in Gender Studies at the University of Ottawa (2015) and a diploma in Photojournalism at Loyalist College (2019). Additionally, she has a certificate in Mohawk Language and Culture through Queen's University and Tsi Työnnheht Onkwawén:na (2020). Shelby uses her artwork to explore her connection to and place in the world as a Kanyen'kehá:ka woman. Her artwork and films have been shown in Canada, the US, New Zealand, and the UK. Most recently, she had a solo exhibition of her photography at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre titled *"Shé:kon se'onhwentsyä:ke ratinékere tsi nihá:ti nè:ne yesanorónhkhwa" (There are still people in the world that love you)* in 2022. She was long-listed for the Scotiabank New Generation Photography Award (2021) and is the recipient of an Indigenous Arts and Stories Governor General's History Award (Historica Canada 2018).

www.shelbylisk.com

Curator's bio:

Treva Pullen-Legassie is PhD candidate, curator, and artist born and based in Tkaronto, Treaty 13 territory. As a curator, her process values embodied and incidental knowledge and a commitment to Land and its vast complexity. Pullen-Legassie is one of the co-founders of the Curatorial Research-Creation Collective. She has curated new media based exhibitions such as Femynnytees (2018), #NATURE (2016) and Influenc(Ed.) Machines and co-ordinated Cheryl Sim's YMX: Land and Loss after Mirabel. Her doctoral research is supported by the J.W. McConnell Memorial Doctoral Fellowship and FRQSC Doctoral Research Scholarship.

trevalegassie.ca

Image credits:

Aerial view of the Don River from Bloor Street to Queen Street, 1948. Courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

Yves Ameline, *Don River looking north*, 1985. Courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

Unwin, Browne and Sankey, Surveyors, "River Don Straightening Plan," showing lands to be expropriated, May 7, 1888. City of Toronto Archives, Series 725, File 12.

Keating Channel, looking east during construction, 1914. Courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

Rendering of Promontory Park and the River Valley Park, 2022. Courtesy of Waterfront Toronto.