

In Places Rarely Seen

An exhibition of print installation, video, photography, and text

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including and required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

In Places Rarely Seen is an interdisciplinary exhibition bringing together print installation, video, photography, sound and text. This thesis exhibition considers my own shifting perception of what Nature *is* and how I relate to it. This shift is informed by my lived experiences as someone from a French settler background, exploring what it means to create ecologically focused art, temporal investigations, Indigenous ways of knowing Nature and land, as well as the similarities and differences between art and science. There are four sections: *Poetry and Narrative*; *(Authentic) Experience*; *Temporality*; and *The Environmental Crisis*. A self-authored poem bookends each section—as a trio the poems contextualize my experience of, with, and in Nature.

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The following work was developed on the traditional territories of the Atikamekw (Nehirowiski Aski) and the Abenaki (Abénaquis) peoples, which border the northern and southern shores of the St. Lawrence River. I would also like to acknowledge the historical presence of the Innus, Algonquin, and Cree peoples, who alongside the Atikamekw once shared the shores of Tapiskawan sipi (Saint Maurice River) according to *les relations de voisinage*. The supporting institution, the University of Waterloo operates on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (also known as Neutral), Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. The University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River.

As a white man of Québécois descent, I recognize how my privilege has benefited me in terms of my education, my mobility, my access to land from the westernmost to the easternmost coastlines of Turtle Island, which I have moved through, and inhabited at various moments in my personal history. I remain conscious of this privilege as I spend time on the land, in the face of my own adversities, seeking out a way to recover, reconstruct, and reconsider my identity not in spite of but in part because of the complex histories of occupation that surround various landscapes.

Thank you to my graduate committee, Tara Cooper and Lois Andison, whose wealth of knowledge and expertise, generosity, and patience have contributed significantly to developing the work seen here in this exhibition. It has been an honour to create work with the guidance of two mentors who I admire deeply.

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G

For teaching me the meaning of love and sacrifice
and for continuing to share your wisdom
through the wind and the waves.

27 September 1951 – 07 March 2018

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INTRODUCTION

When I was younger, Nature¹ was a place of leisure and sport, a place of escape and imagination. My fondest memories are set in mountain landscapes, the woodlot of a potato farmer's field, in a ravine at the center of a suburban neighbourhood—places where I challenged myself physically by climbing trees and rocky slopes, learned patience waiting for hours in trees while hunting with my father, and occupied myself by following my intuition amongst trees when there was little else to do. Although I've held a lifelong love for the outdoors, my early perspectives were informed largely by white-settler colonialism and I'm in the process of acknowledging the origins of things I've taken for granted—from access to National Parks to the sweet taste of maple syrup²—while actively unlearning colonially supported perspectives of dominion through a practice of self-education achieved through listening and reading.

Nearing my third decade of life I've found myself overwhelmed by a surplus of lifechanging adversity which began with my move from Alberta to Ontario in 2017, and led to my relocating to Quebec in 2020. In close succession, two close family members were lost under tragic circumstances and I separated from my fiancée with whom I had been planning a family. Throughout, I have battled mental health issues. Making art and spending time in various landscapes during this time of loss while facing

¹ Treating 'Nature' as a proper noun throughout this document signals that I consider Nature as a concept broader than our capacity to interpret it entirely. Capitalization also implies a connection to 'Mother Nature'.

² These two examples represent a small portion of things that I appreciated having access to for years before ever understanding their connections to colonial domination. Today they are virtually ubiquitous and tied closely to Canadian identity but have histories fraught with violence and exploitation.

uncertainty about the future helped me center myself—an intense reflection both inside and outward towards my surroundings.

In their book *Being Ecological*, Timothy Morton writes about "feelings of unreality" and "distorted or altered reality, feelings of the uncanny: feeling *weird*."³ They go on to explain that this "feeling of not-quite-reality is exactly the feeling of being in a catastrophe."⁴ They go on to address that *uncertainty* is an important part of thinking about ecology—thinking in an ecological way. I first read this characterization of experience when I was dealing with the fallout of my own personal catastrophes and coped by positioning myself amongst Nature. Each day I would walk the forests, marshlands, and grasslands nearby my rural home just to watch and listen. I counted birds and photographed them, documenting their presence for citizen science while learning about their territories and habits. I fell asleep most evenings reading guidebooks: memorizing names, descriptions and migration patterns. One night I was woken by the monotonic trill of an Eastern Screech owl and followed it outside. I laid down, calm beneath the tree of the calling bird, feeling a thousand blades of grass on my bare arms and legs. As I felt bugs crawl over my skin, I envisioned myself decaying in the grass, and found myself in a deep state of peace before falling asleep. My conception of Nature had shifted dramatically from what it once was, and I had fallen deeply in love with what I found.

³ Morton, Timothy. *Being Ecological*. MIT Press, 2019. Print. 54

⁴ Ibid 40

POETRY AND NARRATIVE

The melodies of the poet ascend and leap and pierce
into the deeps of infinite time.⁵ –Ralph Waldo Emerson

During my first year of study at The University of Waterloo, I took two creative writing courses where I learned about the craft of writing and began consciously integrating it into my visual art practice. Through experimentation, revision processes, and the application of learned technical skills, I found myself inspired by the expansive potential of written words both as image and as symbols for transporting the mind to other places. In his essay *The Poet*, Ralph Waldo Emerson addresses the ulterior function of symbology and the role of a poet in our constructions of reality:

We are symbols and inhabit symbols; workmen, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object. He perceives the independence of the thought on the symbol, the stability of the thought, the accidentality and fugacity of the symbol.⁶

Emerson's description captures what I admire most about works of poetry that I am drawn to: works which offer a sense that the poet has accessed something unique about their subject—that they have an intimate understanding of it and are able to effectively reconstruct moments and sensations in order to transmit them to the

⁵ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Emerson Essays: First and Second Series*. 35

⁶ Emerson 29

reader. For me this transmission of experience is, in a sense, a form of storytelling and I consider narrative to be an essential element of my practice.

Born into a family of expressive storytellers, I only realized recently the extent to which storytelling contributes to my working-class family's conceptions of self-identity and yet I'm certain they would be hard pressed to consider themselves 'storytellers.'

For clarity: when I speak of "family" plainly, I refer to my father's side—the Blackburns—a rambunctious group of Québécois people. The practice of storytelling is at the root of social life and mutual connection and they revel in detail that enhances the vividness of the portrayal, making possible a kind of emotional transmission⁷.

Despite their unique aptitudes for vibrant storytelling, in a sense, their reliance on stories for rationalizing their existence simply reflects a much broader societal phenomenon of relying on narrative, as much as or more than objective fact, for guiding perceptions and principles.

In *Uncivilised: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*, British writers Paul Kingsnorth and Douglas Hine state that "humans have always lived by stories," and suggest that "with stories, with art, with symbols and layers of meaning...the storyteller weaves the mysterious into the fabric of life, lacing it with the comic, the tragic, the obscene, making safe paths through dangerous territory."⁸ They propose that over time, the

⁷ During a 3200 km motorcycle trip with my Aunt Manon, I recognized my father's storytelling style and realized that it was a familial trait rather than especially unique to him. She was energetic and gestural as she shared tales with our hosts each night of how cold the wind blew and how thick the fog was. She never exaggerated but made sure to let listeners know she dried her underwear in a public bathroom during a break for lunch.

⁸ Kingsnorth, Paul, and Dougald Hine. *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*. 17

relegation of storytelling to being merely a form of entertainment has drawn attention away from the narratives that shape our society, which become accepted simply as truth—this is at the core of what they call "the myth of civilisation."⁹ They go on to warn us that the solutions to creating ecological and social change are not as simple as reducing our carbon emissions or being more kind to one another. They urge us to grab hold of the narratives that define our civilisation:

In such a moment, writers, artists, poets and storytellers of all kinds have a critical role to play. Creativity remains the most uncontrollable of human forces: without it, the project of civilisation is inconceivable, yet no part of life remains so untamed and undomesticated. Words and images can change minds, hearts, even the course of history. Their makers shape the stories people carry through their lives, unearth old ones and breathe them back to life, add new twists, point to unexpected endings. It is time to pick up the threads and make the stories new, as they must always be made new, starting from where we are.¹⁰

This is a call to creatives to use their work to claw back the "runaway narrative,"¹¹ which permits white settler colonialism to perpetuate ecological injustices. Timothy Morton suggests that Kingsnorth and Hine's "bleak certainty misses how things are," and "deletes strangeness."¹² For me however, their call offered a starting point for speaking out against the projects of civilisation (colonialism); by standing outside the human bubble to see us as we are."¹³ I propose that writing or creating art in a way that exposes the inherent failures of colonialism, makes the strangeness more visible,

⁹ As a Canadian researcher, I will consider "civilisation" as Kingsnorth and Hine describe it to be interchangeable with "colonialism" since the former historically has defined the latter

¹⁰ Kingsnorth, Hine, *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto* 16

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Morton, *Being Ecological* 54

¹³ Kingsnorth, Hine 20

more tangible, no matter how bleak the representation appears. Through my practice, I find myself looking for brief glimpses of “how things really are” so-to-speak, carving out and preserving the authenticity hidden within the seemingly mundane. While reading Indigenous writer Robin Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*¹⁴, I was delighted by her suggestion that a writer’s walk should be called a “metaphoray”, based on the idea that “when botanists go walking the forests and fields looking for plants, we say we are going on a foray.”¹⁵ My own metaphorays often lead me to new discoveries which contributes to my understanding of Nature and my relationship with it.

As an artist and storyteller, it can be difficult to limit anthropocentric bias while representing and responding to my surroundings, but one way I’ve tried to do this explicitly, aside from trying to work from informed perspectives, is through documentation using motion activated trail camera photographs. The photographs for *Residents* were captured in Bonsecours, Quebec on the privately owned property of my aunt and uncle while I was staying with them. The trail camera for me represents a technology that is not usually associated with fine art, but rather with hunting and even environmental conservation—two ways of interacting with the natural world with more in common than not¹⁶. Rather than use this surveillance technology to gain some

¹⁴ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. first ed., Milkweed Editions, 2013.

¹⁵ Ibid 62

¹⁶ Based on numerous conversations I’ve had about hunting, I have the impression that generally most people consider hunting to morally and practically at odds with the goals of conservation. However, it is often hunters, especially those from indigenous backgrounds, who hold the closest knowledge of the land they frequent, while historically scientific research has often facilitated human dominance over Nature through exploitation of acquired knowledge. This is not to pit one approach against the other, but to bring light to a commonly overlooked perspective.

kind of power or control over the animals through learning their habits, my intention was to deepen my sense of their presence and by finding out who else visited this site. On numerous occasions I captured images of myself by accident, and once to my surprise I realized that unbeknownst to me, three deer had been foraging in the space right up until the moment I arrived and managed to flee entirely undetected apart from the photographic evidence.



Fig. 1 (left) and Fig. 2 (right): examples of unedited trail camera photos showing an incorrect date range.

At Atelier Presse-Papier, a traditional printmaking studio in Trois-Rivières, Quebec, I screen printed eight different photographs from the trail camera footage on 120 sheets of newsprint paper and compiled them as an ephemeral 48 foot by 9 foot mural in downtown Trois-Rivières. The compiled work is indexical and fragile, and vulnerable to their exposure to not only the elements, but also the will of the general public. The composite ghostly infrared images of forest, deer, snow and man form a narrative sequence that seems to perform like a form of reverse surveillance—nature

observing city life. The meanings that emerge from this work, I hope, will be greatly varied depending on the viewer. As a temporary public artwork this is inevitable, and I'm interested to see the way that the viewing public may impose themselves upon the work. To date, each time I have walked past the mural I have witnessed someone stop and take the time to look more closely at the work. They are intrigued by the novelty and I know eventually it will fade into the background of their lives as it becomes more familiar.



Fig. 3. *Residents*. Jordan Blackburn. 2021. Paper and glue, brick wall

Erythroptalmus¹⁷

She was worth stopping for
beautiful even as she convulsed on the hot pavement.

A red orbital ring
exposing the depth of the tragedy:
Rain crow, black-billed cuckoo,
one in a million.

This unthinkable mischance
happened so quickly—
the sudden flight of a flushed bird out-of-the blue
interrupted violently by a speeding SUV
sending the soft creature flailing
with a cracked skull and a broken wing.

As witness turned first responder
I raised her up from the solid yellow line
and walked her to the shoulder,
entranced by the rapid rhythm of her breathing

Crimson soaked feathers
painted a clear picture of her fate:
to die roadside in Québec
mere days after completing a 6000km flight from South America.

This secretive creature
that many birders have heard but never seen
lay with zygodactyl feet clasped around my glove
as we stared at one another.

I thought of a sharp blade
removed from my pocket earlier that day,
now only useful as a literary device,
and longed for it so I could end her suffering
as swiftly as it began.

So aware of my power
but unwilling to dishonor her resilience
with a quick step of my boot,
or a flick of the wrist,
I lay her down in the cool grass with an apology.

¹⁷ Blackburn, Jordan. "Erythroptalmus" University of Waterloo, ON. Unpublished poem.

(AUTHENTIC) EXPERIENCE

*Erythroptalmus*¹⁸ (fig. 4 & 5), the video work that occupies the back wall of Gallery Two was edited from a single-take recording made above and below the surface of a small man-made lake on a modest tract of land recently purchased by my relatives in Québec. My initial intention was to recapture what I had seen while previously free diving to the bottom: the sunlight crashing through the water, as air from my own lungs escaped as bubbles and raced towards the surface. A breathtaking view. This time when I hit record on the camera and jumped into the lake the second time, it seemed colder, I felt more alone, and a fear of drowning crept in. In the audio the viewer can hear tension in my breathing (with a snorkel), and my attempts to sink calmly to the bottom, as I had previously, were interrupted by an intense internal survival response. By focusing on the re-creation, I ended up distracting myself from the immediate experience, and in the process the potential terror of nature (i.e. the sublime) set in. This aural tension remains in the final edit of *Erythroptalmus* in tandem with the subtle beauty which speaks to an uncanny place: a human-made lake populated by small fish and frogs (as well as myself), flanked by invasive Phragmites and Red-Winged Blackbirds. Like the visuals of the video itself, the spoken poem signals the entanglement of Nature and Culture, while bringing attention to spaces where their imaginary edges grind together causing friction. The presentation of this

¹⁸ Erythroptalmus means "red eye" and is phonetically pronounced eryth-roph-thal-mus

work as a large-scale projection allows the viewer to enter the work, be submerged in the murky water, and experience my claustrophobic tension—and possibly some of their own.



Fig. 4. Screenshot from *Erythroptalmus*. Jordan Blackburn. 2020. Video. 00:02:21



Fig. 5. Screenshot from *Erythroptalmus*. Jordan Blackburn. 2020. 00:02:21

Thinking about this man-made pond while in video post-production, Tracy Fullerton's artwork and video game *Walden, a Game* comes to mind. Fullerton describes

it as an “experimental [game] focused on reflective play”¹⁹. It is slow paced and contemplative, allowing players to experience Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden* (or *Life in the Woods*) while navigating a digitally constructed *Walden* complete with routine tasks that Thoreau himself did. Like *Erythroptalmus*, the game is played from a first-person's perspective. What struck me most about my experience was that as I roamed through the “ludic collage of natural and philosophical simulation”²⁰ and peered around the virtual scene, from the ground beneath my feet to the tree canopy overhead, I found myself repeatedly drawing in unexpected and deep sighs of breath—ones of relaxation, and relief. It was surprising that the visuals combined with the sounds of birds singing and leaves crunching underfoot transported my mind to a peaceful and contemplative state. But without all the other sensations of being out-of-doors (the smells, the haptic experiences that are felt at the level of skin, the time of transition that it takes to get to the location etc.), the sensations were short-lived. It reminded me of a chapter in E.O. Wilson's book, *Biophilia* where he sets up a thought experiment describing “a beautiful and peaceful world, where the Horizon is rimmed by Snowy Peaks reaching into a perfect sky.”²¹ After a number of additional details to add vibrance to the visualization he states that despite the place being “the most visually pleasing that human imagination can devise...this world has always been dead,” and

¹⁹ Fullerton, Tracy. “A Year at Play in the Woods of Walden Pond.” *Art Journal*, vol. 79, no.2, 2020. 95

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia*. Harvard University Press, 1984. Print. 114

that every plant is merely an expertly crafted copy, a copy that only exists in the mind not in reality.²²

Erythroptalmus, along with works like *Tributary* and my poem *Neighbours* (which are discussed further on in this paper), attempts to draw from the affective immediacy of Nature in its various forms through the combination and juxtaposition of narrative elements which evoke a similar sensibility. The works strive to abandon traditional notions of landscape while gaining a new authenticity and expanded accessibility. What is distinct in this work is my use of first person—the POV of the camera (a GoPro action camera physically attached to my body), as well as within the poem, perspectives that puts the viewer/listener in my head. In this way it could be said that my own body becomes the subject of these site-specific investigations.

²² Wilson, *Biophilia* 114

Anthropology²³

I sketch a guideline with thin strokes,
inner and external boundaries,
veiled rules based on the moment.

As the first gesture severs bonds made long ago
I remind myself to keep my fingers clear of the blade
and a faint vision for the future begins to clarify.

Pieces of the past become markers of the present
landing with light taps on the hardwood floor
falling from a halved piece of yellow birch.

A palpable rhythm emerges, time slows,
history repeats itself as learned technique,
guiding each precise movement.

I look for clues in the grain; the wood's personality.
Sometimes it plays tricks or deceives
to see if I'm really paying attention.

A practical object begins to emerge,
and I feel not that I am shaping, but excavating
an anthropological artifact hidden inside.

What a magnificent and welcome surprise
to discover something as simple as a spoon
inside the severed limb of an ancient tree.

²³ Blackburn, Jordan. "Anthropology." University of Waterloo, ON. Unpublished poem.

TEMPORALITY

Toward the beginning of the summer of 2020, at a time when we were all just starting to settle into “the new normal” of life during a global pandemic, I was listening to an episode of the Radiolab podcast²⁴ where producers and interviewees spoke about their various perspectives on time in relation to the pandemic. Andrea Prouser, spoke about the way time seems to stop for hours while she's intensely focused at work in a bio-secure lab, and 30-year coronavirus specialist Mark Denison spoke about how these viruses have been around for millennia, and exist very much according to their own timescale.²⁵ Denison goes on to say, "outside the virology, it's also telling us about the fragility of the global organism of humans, being our political and economic and social, financial, cultural systems and habits, that those are all being probed by the virus as well."²⁶

My thesis is not about the novel coronavirus, and yet in a way it is. This virus is a form of Nature as much as anything else, and now it is *forcing* global societies to re-evaluate their systems by revealing deep societal and economic vulnerabilities and biases. Other organisms have been begging us to do the same, from migratory birds struggling to synchronize with shifting seasonal timing,²⁷ to coral reefs bleached by

²⁴ Abumrad, Jad. “Dispatch #6: Strange Times”. *Radiolab*, New York Public Radio, 20 May 2020, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/dispatch-6-strange-times>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Horton, K.G., La Sorte, F.A., Sheldon, D. *et al.* Phenology of nocturnal avian migration has shifted at the continental scale. *Nat. Clim. Chang.* 10, 63–68 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-019-0648-9>. 63

warming oceans.²⁸ Lifeforms with a deep reliance on the world's natural cycles have been under immediate existential threat due to an incompatibility with modern industrial timescales. To us, their loss or threat of loss are merely *symptoms* of a greater threat of catastrophic climate change. Tragically, by not imposing an immediate perceivable threat to those in positions of power who benefit from global systems of production and consumption, vulnerable species and ecosystems are left to adapt to new extremes and major timescale shifts or face the risk of extinction²⁹.

Thanks to a disregard for this, our reliance on large-scale industrial processes and the timescales associated with them has grown stronger and have become more oppressive by the day. With the novel coronavirus at the wheel, our perceptions have undergone a major shift, and very possibly for the better. This should not be read as if COVID-19 pandemic is a good thing, especially since it is the poor and working-class citizens of the world, the ones who are already at odds with established industrial time, who are disproportionately affected rather than a select few who in many cases have actually become richer as a result³⁰. Though the pandemic is not caused by climate change, its pervasiveness and global reach has been facilitated by the same systems³¹ that gave us virtual dominion over Nature and led us into the current climate crises.

²⁸ Sapp, Jan. *What Is Natural: Coral Reef Crises*. Oxford University Press, 1999. 191

²⁹ Huebener, Paul. *Nature's Broken Clocks: Reimagining Time in the Face of the Environmental Crisis*. University of Regina Press, 2020. 9

³⁰ Collins, Chuck, and Omar Ocampo. "Updates: Billionaire Wealth, U.S. Job Losses and Pandemic Profiteers." *Inequality.org*, 25 Feb. 2021, inequality.org/great-divide/updates-billionaire-pandemic/.

³¹ See capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism.

Today it can hardly be denied that “the inversion of the mastery of nature into the *destruction of nature* (and the potential destruction of ourselves *by nature*) seems to be primarily a result of a lack of respect for the “intrinsic temporalities” of nature.”³²



Fig. 6. *Now and Then*. Jordan Blackburn. 2020. Carving in fallen log

In *Nature's Broken Clocks*, Paul Huebener describes the interplay of narrative, culture, natural and mechanized time and how they may be used, in limited ways, to re-evaluate these “intrinsic temporalities of nature”:

³² Rosa, Hartmut. *Social Acceleration: a New Theory of Modernity*. Translated by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, Columbia University Press, 2017. 285

"No school of thought can account for all temporalities of nature any more than a work of literary criticism can construct a final temporal analysis of every poem in existence, or perhaps even a single poem. An awareness of this limitation must vitally underpin any project that seeks to investigate ecological times. When we equate one particular temporality—or cyclicity, or anything else—with natural time, we are privileging a single, limited perspective, and denying other forms of timely experience."³³

Now and Then (fig. 6) is a site-specific artwork created as a way to explore these modes of temporality through its production, materiality, and representation. It consists of a large fallen cedar tree, carved with half-inch deep text reading NOW AND THEN. I first discovered the tree on the threshold between suburban Shawinigan-Sud, QC and a forested ecological preserve while walking with friends behind their home, and I associated the physical blurry threshold between public and private with the perceptual boundaries of past, present, and future, imagining how the surrounding landscape once appeared and how it may change. Despite being a protected landscape, it still feels vulnerable as a forest-island surrounded by both suburban development and farmland—after all, the responsibility for its protection as a preserve is upheld by a government which almost routinely changes legislation to make way for development, and historically has not always followed through on formal agreements. The appearance of the sculpture in a semi-private, semi-public environment with no didactic information arouses questions of subject and authorship and is intended to evoke the sensation I feel when I happen upon an animal's den or a makeshift shelter.

³³ Huebener, 51

The transformation of the decaying log into a sculpture, and subject of critique when represented in a gallery, calls into question the identity of the landscape using language that at first appears distinct, but becomes mutable the more it is considered. It is liminal, both physically through its materiality and also temporally, existing within different timescales.



Fig. 7. *Now and Then* (state photo). Jordan Blackburn. 2020. Carving in fallen log

In the gallery *Now and Then* is shown as a projection in order to enhance the idea that materially speaking, the work itself exists outside of the gallery setting and that its representation within the gallery is as ephemeral as the light emitted from the projector bulb. It also allows the work to be seen on a scale which is closer to life-size without further consuming physical materials. It exists as a still but moving image (via the projector). In doing so it undermines the viewer's expectation that things will change, and they do, just not before their eyes. That revelation occurs in the short film

following the still image, which documents the carving process. Along with the repetitive tapping of the chisel, the viewer is given a sense of the temporal window I occupied in the landscape while creating the work. Witnessing as I relaxed into a rhythm and laboured in the spirit of creation while birds fattened themselves on insects and seeds in preparation for winter.



Fig. 8. Roni Horn. *White Dickinson (Blossoms Have Their Leisures)*. 2006, white plastic and aluminium, Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan.

Inspiration for *Now and Then* was drawn from the text-based works of artists like Roni Horn, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and Robert Montgomery, to name a few. Of particular interest early on was Horn's *White Dickinson* (fig 8), where select phrases from the

works of Emily Dickinson were embedded in long pieces of aluminum bar stock and stood up vertically against gallery walls, which created physical representations of the intoxicating phrases. In speaking about the objects, Horn describes “The hybridizing of looking and reading” and goes on to explain that “the experience that binds these two acts is another kind of pairing...with you as the third element.”³⁴ Long before *Now and Then*, I responded to Horn’s work by recessing laser cut lettering into a hand-carved piece of hazelnut wood. The project was technically fascinating and turned out beautifully, but the process of combining plastic with wood alone in my studio felt alienating and anti-climactic. Working on site allowed me time to contemplate the environment around me and roll the words around in my mind for the entire time that I worked—like a form of constructed ceremony or meditation. To borrow from Kimmerer again, she describes her father’s ceremony of pouring coffee grounds from a pot before pouring cups for their family—an act that began as merely a practical way to clear the spout—saying that what makes ceremony powerful is that “it marries the mundane to the sacred. The water turns to wine, the coffee to a prayer. The material and the spiritual mingle like grounds mingled with humus, transformed like steam rising from a mug into the morning mist.”³⁵ In *Now and Then*, the repetitive act of carving allows me to connect with the environment around me as the sound of my work blends into the

³⁴ Rat Hole Gallery. “Roni Horn.” Ratholegallery.com, September 2010.

³⁵ Kimmerer, 51

sounds of the forest, and as I contribute to the acceleration of the fallen tree's decay through sculpting its surface.

While this way of giving dimension to language through inscription, embedment, and construction is prevalent in the work of artists previously mentioned, similar temporal considerations can be found in Marlene Creates's *Our Lives Concurrent for 58 Years Until the Hurricane, Blast Hole Pond Road, Newfoundland 2010* where she cut cross-sections from trees on her property which were felled by Hurricane Igor in 2010. Creates had the rings of each sample counted and learned that the age of each was not always directly related to their size. In the gallery, the viewer is only able to view the cross sections themselves which have been severed both physically and temporally from the leftover tree stumps, which over ten years later have become grey with decay. In the case of my own work, I'm looking forward to experiencing it again ten years from now and intend to document it throughout the changing seasons.



Fig. 9. State photograph of *Our Lives Concurrent for 58 Years Until the Hurricane, Blast Hole Pond Road, Newfoundland 2010*. Marlene Creates. 2020.

Neighbours

Living on the fringe of our perception
in places rarely seen
like eaves and the backs
of illuminated drugstore signs
House Sparrows thrive.

Chirrup-chirrup can be heard
among spray paint and red brick walls,
grocery cart corrals and manicured hedges.
Their presence
signifies our own.

These urban beings will never know
vast forests or harsh deserts
as intimately as they know
the taste of streetside puddles
and stale pretzels,

and still they possess wisdom
of cold nights and getting by,
content with freedom
gleaned from the cracks of decay,
and afforded by dependence.

ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES

If one considers the science around anthropogenic climate change, the link between the devastating increase in global temperatures over the past 50 years and human produced greenhouse gases is undeniable³⁶, but while it can be tempting for me to share the figures of that science here in my paper, or in my artwork itself, I believe that the primary role of art in the conversation is not necessarily to aid in the dissemination or interpretation of data sets that have already been provided by science. I believe my role as an artist who is concerned with ecological discussions is to work directly from my personal experience and from a foundation of ecological awareness. Morton describes this awareness simply as “acknowledging in a deep way the existence of beings that aren’t you, with whom you coexist” and he goes on to express that “once you’ve done that, you can’t un-acknowledge it.”³⁷ This pithy take felt soft, even inactive at first, but after rolling around in my brain I understood it as a perfect starting point for even more impactful and precise conversations. Morton goes on to express ideas about the importance of non-violent coexistence and its role as the base of democracy, then proceeds to use this as a way to make a case for expanding democracy to include non-humans³⁸. This is a great perspective, but it fails to acknowledge that historically many Indigenous peoples have placed great value on

³⁶ *The Causes of Climate Change*. Edited by Holly Shaftel, NASA.

³⁷ Morton 128

³⁸ Ibid. 122

coexisting non-violently with other-than-human beings since well before facing the colonial violence of white settlers.

In the text, *Indigenous Environmental Justice and Sustainability*, Deborah McGregor addresses that for many Indigenous communities, ecosystem destruction has been a concern since long before western society recognized it as a crisis—to the figure of five centuries sooner.³⁹ McGregor goes on to state that “from an Indigenous point of view, environmental injustices, including the climate crisis, are therefore inevitably tied to, and symptomatic of, ongoing processes of colonialism, dispossession, capitalism, imperialism/globalization and patriarchy.”⁴⁰ With that said, historically it was believed by some Indigenous groups that it was possible for newcomers and Indigenous people to live in harmony both with Nature and alongside one another.⁴¹ Sadly, contemporary western society relies heavily on systems which “aggressively undermine Indigenous peoples, in particular Indigenous women in systemic, ongoing, and violent ways.”⁴² Teresa Castro offers some unique wisdom around the subject while writing about the violence of extractive capitalism in *The Mediated Plant*:

³⁹ McGregor, Deborah, Steven Whitaker, Mahisha Sritharan. “Indigenous environmental justice and sustainability”. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*. Volume 43. 2020. 36

⁴⁰ McGregor 36

⁴¹ This is evident when considering the Tawagonshi Agreement of 1613, also known as the Two Row Wampum Treaty between the Haudenosaunee and Dutch.

⁴² McGregor 36

...extractive capitalism takes its toll everywhere, and environmental breakdown is here to stay. to survive and resist means to adjust, to leave behind reductive stances, and to wrench ourselves loose from our monological, colonizing grip on "nature." Forests are not stocks of natural resources (even if they're sustainably explored), nor are they "the lungs of the earth." Forests are life-forms and forms of life, from whom we must learn and with whom we need to forge alliances. We need to rebel against the deep-rooted, dualistic conceptions that have radically separated us from nature and more-than-human others. Ultimately, we need to rebel against ourselves: maybe the mediated, sentient, intelligent plant can help us to queer ourselves-as-humans, as we either, as Plumwood declared, "go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all."⁴³

Unfortunately, despite all we know today about colonialism in Canada, there are still many who openly support the suppression of Indigenous voices. We witnessed this in the push to complete the Coastal GasLink pipeline despite nationwide protests and the establishment of blockades protecting the unceded territory of the Wet'suwet'en (wet-SO-ih-ten) people⁴⁴. Other times the impacts are more insidious; for example, during a conversation with Indigenous artist Jacques Newashish from La Tuque, Quebec, I learned about his concerns around the fact that for most Québécois people hunting is largely a pastime or sport, even if they consume their harvest. He further unpacked that the Government of Québec which relies on revenue from hunting permits, games tags, and taxes from the sale of arms, profits from the widespread Québécois tradition of hunting while Indigenous communities like the Atikamekw people living near Tapiskwan sipi (Saint-Maurice River) are affected by overharvesting of animals in

⁴³ Castro, Teresa. "The Mediated Plant." *E-Flux*, vol. 102, Sept. 2019. 4

⁴⁴ Coastal GasLink follows a similar path to the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipelines which was rejected in 2016 after six years of protest.

addition to reduced access to land and resources. As someone who comes from a family of Québécois settlers who have historically hunted for sustenance, I thought I had a clear position on hunting ethics. Through extended conversations with Jacques, I came to realize how my understanding of the situation was biased by my settler upbringing. I think about Indigenous knowledge—how it is traditionally shared through oral transmission and acknowledge the value of this exchange as I reflect on the building of trusting relationships and the sharing of regional knowledge.

My particular interest in Québec is due to the fact that as an adult, I am in the process of re-inhabiting the province as a descendent of mixed heritage French settlers. Because I was raised in Alberta, I'm only now learning about the multiple histories of the landscapes in modern day Québec since my arrival in the spring of 2020. I grew up enamoured by physically engaging with Nature through activities like hiking, climbing, cycling, and camping, and someone who has travelled from coast to coast on Turtle Island, I have struggled with my own white privilege as I learn how best to support BIPOC communities and live with strong environmental ethics on a quotidian level. As a Canadian citizen I've been afforded access to "public" land across the colony of Canada, lands which historically Indigenous communities have been denied access to or were forcibly removed from. As I produce artworks centered around my perception of Nature, these issues of privilege are not always addressed explicitly,

but they are present, and have informed the conception and consideration of new work.

My most recent work *Tributary* was filmed on ancestral Abenaki territory (Bonsecours, QC) beside a retention pond or man-made lake found on a section of land my Aunt and Uncle purchased from a developer last summer. The work probes the inherent vagueness of natural landscapes which have been extensively developed and in turn, change or create micro ecosystems which otherwise would not have existed. This temporary site-specific installation focuses on an environment where Nature and Culture grind together to create something which metaphorically resembles twilight more so than day or night. The tent sits on a simple trail laid with rock from a nearby quarry and contains a 360° projection of rainfall on the same lake where the installation is situated. We hear a car passing in the distance and the oscillating sound of water as it flows into a drainpipe like a black hole in the middle of the lake, then out into a manicured creek. We also hear “true” sounds of Nature: Spring Peeper frogs and American Robins whose songs signal the short transition between day and night, along with the faint sound of American Woodcocks performing their mating flight before tumbling back to earth, into the damp woods below the lake.

The lake itself is full of life, with small fish and salamanders beneath its surface and with trees and grasses around it—the land’s keepers, my aunt and uncle, diligently cut down invasive Phragmites as it grows. Frogs have begun laying gelatinous globs of

eggs around the underwater plants that will hatch out in remarkable numbers just as they did the year before. From the viewers perspective, seeing the reflection of the projection off of the water gives the illusion that rain is falling on the lake's surface, gently agitating the reflected image. The entire scene is in one sense an illusion, a temporal placement of an artwork within a landscape, and yet below the surface it is entirely whole. This landscape, both as a noun and a verb, has been shaped to function primarily for the value that white settlers have imposed upon it, perhaps including even myself as I ask it to serve as primary character within multiple stories I've tried to portray through my work. One day the lake may be cut off from its tributary and grow stagnant, and the moments I've captured may depict the liminal space between its conception and its death, or perhaps it will be left to thrive and one day be overcome with so much life that only an archeological dig could reveal that it was made during a brief time when white colonizers laid claim to the region. For me, *Tributary* completes a circuit. It may even be a self-portrait. It references human habitation, though transitory—it is a safe space. The tent straddles both land and water. It is a mediated experience evidenced by the manmade lake and the projection. It has a ghostly presence, and it is quiet, allowing other life to speak, but because of the illumination, it cannot camouflage its presence.



Fig. 10. *Tributary*. Jordan Blackburn. 2021. Site specific multimedia installation

CONCLUSION

During the time leading up to finally deciding to pursue an MFA at the University of Waterloo, my concerns around ecological issues were deepening. I had considered studying biology after I began to feel like some of the most important labour for change was occurring at a local scale in science. I was uncertain about the value of working as an artist compared to the measurable value of conservation biologists, to list one occupation that can affect change. Although I've been dedicated to continuing my work as an artist for years, it was during the creation of this thesis research that I developed a great understanding that the *cultural* side of the current climate crises is just as important as the science behind understanding and remedying it.

Understanding my own implication in the issues at hand is as important as understanding the issues themselves. By seeking out long held social construction of Nature, I found that the gap between human beings and said Nature are merely perceptual. Like many important forms of practice-based research, each attempt to narrow things down has only revealed more questions and expanded the possibilities of expression. At this point I can merely trust that my intuition and dedication has laid a strong foundation for future explorations through video, photography, poetry, printmaking, and sculpture as forms of knowing and unknowing.

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