

RESEARCH

Walking with a Ghost River: Unsettling Place in the Anthropocene

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The call to explore a different mode of being-human in what many have termed the Anthropocene, is an invitation to think about what it means to live in place in a more expansive and speculative way. It also asks that we take a different starting point for critical inquiry, and rather than pursue an explanatory end, the approach remains ‘curious, experimental, open, adaptive, imaginative, responsive and responsible’ (Gibson et al. 2015: i–ii). This paper charts the messy, and often faltering methodologies we have developed as a means of thinking through urban landscapes of colonial violence, and engaging with the ghostly forms of past histories in present-day urban places through the multi-sensorial experience of walking. In attending to the many complex connections and relationships between socio-economic, techno-political, and the more-than-human world, we broadened our lens of inquiry to include the multitude of related and interconnected spatial and temporal relationships that came across our path, and sought to develop a mode of ethical relationing with a ghost river.

Keywords: water; infrastructure; decolonisation; methodologies; more-than-human

Beckoning a Ghost River

There are few traces today, in southwest Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal, of a river that once ran from the flanks of Mount Royal to the shores of the St. Lawrence River, yet the St. Pierre River was at one time a significant waterway. Our research team from the Concordia Ethnography Lab encountered it, or rather encountered its traces, somewhat by accident. An archeological site had recently been unearthed, and then promptly destroyed and buried, as part of the reconstruction of a massive highway system known as the Turcot Interchange. The site of a small village of tanneries built along the banks of the St. Pierre River is now traversed by the St. Pierre Collector, a glass-fibre reinforced polyester pipe, three metres in diameter, that houses what remains of the old river’s flow, along with the sewage and waste water of a number of Montreal’s southwest boroughs. There was little for us to do with the site itself – artefacts had been extracted by Ministry of Transport archaeologists and dispersed among museum exhibitions and archives, and the site itself buried deep beneath road and berm – but the river beckoned. What ensued was a lengthy process of figuring out what it meant to answer this beckoning and what, precisely, was beckoning.

The call to explore different modes of being in the Anthropocene is an invitation to speculate about what it means to live in place, that we remain ‘curious,

experimental, open, adaptive, imaginative, responsive and responsible’ (Gibson, Rose, Fincher 2015: i–ii). After much searching for the St. Pierre, we began to understand it as a ‘ghost river,’ an absent presence that occasionally made itself felt when we attempted to walk where it once flowed. By walking with this haunting, we were able to engage with the flows of socio-economic, techno-political, and the more-than-human matter and waters of a partially present river. The potential paths of the former St. Pierre provided a range of possible routes, and ways of making connections between different urban temporalities and infrastructural assemblages, unsettling our assumptions about the city.

On any given walk, the three authors of this paper were joined by as many as five other companions from the Lab¹ and each of us brought different interests and attachments to an evolving conversation. Kassandra brought to the project a curiosity about how traces of an old river on the land matched, or didn’t match, the traces she could find in archival maps, and set about building unruly maps for us to follow, maps that would change (and often tear, or simply blow away) as we walked. Kregg focused mostly on the way infrastructure had been built, and the way spatial interruptions, both seen and unseen, disrupted our experience of time in the city, rendering it radically Anthropocenic. For Tricia, following the ghost river demanded a decolonial reflection on what it meant to be a settler (and all of us were) in a space once unmarked by colonial relations. We have chosen to retain some of the shifting, polyvocal character of our conversations, and the ‘we’ in the pages ahead never speaks from an entirely stable place, either theoretically or politically. Yet nor

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does the 'we' signal a sleight of hand. In retrospect, it is surprising how much we talked in this voice during our collective journey over the landscape, and how we mostly agreed with each other, even as our different voices brought different (often conflicting) concerns into focus.

Walking with Ghosts

Our first perceptions of, and speculations about, the river were informed by a range of documents, digital and material, that have attempted to understand the Montreal archipelago over time. Through the winter of 2017–18, we mapped the divergent lines drawn by a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century cartographers onto present-day street maps, and began to speculate about where the river might have flowed, as well as to construct a chronology of its canalisation and burial. Often, the river disappeared from maps, buried sometime in the gap between renderings, but occasionally it reappeared or headed off in a different direction, even changing names. Environmental and cultural histories of the St. Lawrence watershed (Campbell et al. 2019; Macfarlane 2014), the development of Montreal's wastewater management system (Dagenais 2001; Dagenais and Poitras 2007; Fougères 2011; Gagnon 2006; Dagenais 2017), manufacturing and industrial history (Lewis 2000; Desloges and Gelly 2002), and the discourse analysis of Québec national identity and its relations with water and energy development (Desbiens 2013; 2004), all helped in our interpretations of the maps. Visits to neighbourhood historical societies and libraries, as well as the city archives offered up old newspaper clippings and public health pamphlets, oral histories and engineers' drawings.

Our research also coincided with the \$3.7 billion project to reconstruct the largest interchange in the province, the Turcot Interchange along with an eight-kilometre stretch of the Bonaventure autoroute that runs parallel to where the St. Pierre River once flowed. The project has been tremendously disruptive for not only the residents of southwest Montreal, but for tens of thousands of commuters. Morning and afternoon local radio programming diligently report on bridge and exit closures due to the construction. Every month there are '*comités de bon voisinage*' (good neighbourhood committees) in which representatives from various levels of government, the Ministry of Transport of Québec (MTQ), and the construction company meet with residents. But despite all this information, by the end of the winter, the river was still somewhat abstract. A spectre, if you will. A line on a map, the subject of numerous stories and narratives, a troublesome source of water to be piped and buried. And then came the spring – and we wandered outside and finally realised we were following a ghost.

What is a ghost river and how can we relate to it? Jacques Derrida famously argued that a spectre is a being that appears to present itself, not in 'flesh and blood,' but in 'a space of invisible visibility' (1994: 158) that speaks of the singularity of its temporality or of its historicity (1994: 126). Emerging when 'time is out of joint,' the spectre 'plays' between the spirit (*Geist*) and the spectre (*Gespenst*), evoking those 'who are no longer' and those

'who are not yet *there*' (1994: 156). The figure of the ghost disjoins both time and being, disrupting the relations between past, present and futures, hovering on the edge of being, becoming 'neither soul nor body, and both one and the other' (p. 5). A 'spectral moment' is one 'that no longer belongs to time, the 'modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now," future present)' dissolve (xix). It manifests as a presence-absence that transverses spatialities and temporalities, calling for the work of mourning, and the principle of respect for the dead and the not-yet-born (xviii). He calls for a notion of justice, and asks what our responsibilities are to those 'beyond all living present'; to both the spectres of the dead whose bones have made the present possible, but also to the spectres of the future, whose possibilities weigh heavily on time (xviii).

And so to begin with, walking with a ghost river asks that we develop an ethics of hauntology; that is, a set of obligations to both past and future generations. Ghosts feature as actors in research on threatened species (Corrington and Adams 2020), political violence and war (Gordon 1997; Auchter 2014; Schwab 2010), displacement and migration (Cho 2009; Maddern 2008), and urban change and memory (Edensor 2005a; 2005b; Comaroff 2007). The uncanny presence of a ghost is one in which absence is experienced; that is, a presence emerges as spectre of its absence. Corrington and Adams find power in the spectre for conservation action, that the hauntings manifest 'troubling presents through memories, materials, and landscapes' (2020: 104) that allow attention to be afforded to 'a form of being in the world that is uncanny and at risk of vanishing' (2020: 106). What most draws us is the way that ghosts unsettle the time of the Anthropocene, not just as a time of rumbling disaster but as a time littered with the disasters of the past (Bubandt 2017; Yusoff 2018; Hetherington 2019). The St. Pierre River, both present and absent in its subterranean and culverted form, haunts the city's historical imagination and its material landscape, and invites us to reckon with the city's layered colonial pasts.

Ghosts also offer useful ways of thinking about how we find ourselves in space. Tim Ingold evokes the figure of the spectre in his characterisation of the embodied experience of erasure when moving through a space that reveals maps to be a 'cartographic illusion' (2000: 234). As a representation or abstraction of space, the map offers no sense of the relational processes that actually construct or bring *place* into being (Massey 2005), and an elision arises when the embodied experience of moving through a space is captured, interpreted and disembodied so as to create a static representation. Before we set out on our ghost walks, we spent a winter studying maps of where the St. Pierre River once flowed above ground, but none of these helped us to connect with it, especially when we realised that the maps often contradicted one another. The idea of walking alongside where it once traversed Montreal's southwest arose organically, but the more we engaged with what that might mean, the more we became aware of the multiple paths, connections, epistemologies and ontologies such an exercise brings forth.

A number of scholars have used walking methodologies to explore place-making, soundscapes and mobility (Rundstrom 1995; Edensor 2010; Pink 2009; Wunderlich 2008; Westerkamp 2006; Butler 2007; Bissell 2013; Bissell and Fuller 2011; Ingold and Vergust 2008.). Others have developed walking as a strategy for decolonising research (Sundberg 2014) and for critical aesthetic practice (Bassett 2004; Careri 2002). Springgay and Truman contend that *walking-with* is not 'to be understood simply as a matter of conviviality or therapy, or a neoliberal inspired self-investment in well-being' but a methodology that 'encourages walkers to make, what Bibi Calderaro and Patricia Ticeneto Cough describe as an 'ontological shift' to think about experience differently, to experience differently, and to experience difference in experiencing' (2018: xiii). It is to think 'in the presence of others' and the 'unpredictability of opening ourselves to possibility' (Instone and Taylor 2015: 146). Drawing on Karen Barad's concept 'intra-action,' they consider the potential for an ethics of relationing to emerge in the 'entangled materialisations' (Barad 2007) of *walking-with* in a more-than-human world, populated by animals, infrastructures, ghosts and other ways of being. Sensitive to Zoe Todd's contention that ontological fabulations can become a new colonising form (Todd 2018), they propose practices that attend to other worldviews of animacy, as well as the very real and material legal struggles of indigenous peoples over land and sovereignty (2016: 9).

These critiques and political struggles accompanied us throughout our *walking-with* a ghost river. The multi-sensorial experience of walking gives rise to what Amin describes as 'the entanglements of bodies in motion and the environmental conditions and physical architecture of a given space' (Amin 2006), but these spaces are haunted by 'the silence of location' accompanied by various 'circumscribed references to Indigeneity' that continue the legacy of colonial violence (Sundberg 2014: 36). Our *walking-with* the ghost river was continually punctuated by moments of what Rudolf Mrázek terms 'the sensing of colonial modernity' (2002), critical junctures in which we both apprehended the silent, and often violent, histories that haunt the landscape of this archipelago, and our own complex entanglements with settler colonisation. What follows is our reflections upon five sites we visited on our *walking-with* the ghost river, which provided a critical engagement with the history of colonial violence, the knowledge and practices of cartography and surveying, and the imperial and capitalist approaches to the city and mobility, that have shaped and reshaped the landscape through the layering of infrastructure.

Responding to the river's beckoning unsettled our understandings and experiences of the city, but however it was summoned – whether cartographic, ghostly, narrative, or mixed water form – the river, as a water timescape, was haunted not only in the sense of memories of the dead, of the drowned and swept away, but in the culverting and burying that has devastated the life that once lived with and as the river. As Barad reminds us, hauntings are not immaterial, 'they are an ineliminable feature of existing material conditions' (2017: 106–7). As a 'living

entanglement' of materials and waters, and geographies and infrastructure, silences and histories, the sounds of buried and culverted water and a multitude of stories, the St. Pierre was a 'river multiple' in the sense conveyed by Annemarie Mol (2002). The ontology of the river emerges within a multitude of practices and discourses, continually constituted and reconstituted through its relations with others. Our walks were continually punctuated by different qualities of encounters, between those moments and places where our various expectations seemed to converge with each other and with some feature of the landscape, and those moments when the river became multiple, leading us, literally, in different directions.

A Question of Definition: Meadowbrook Creek

It is not surprising, in retrospect, that we began our walks at Meadowbrook Creek. While the creek is not in any clear sense the beginning of the water flow that we might call the remnant of the St. Pierre, nor is it where we believe the historical St. Pierre to have originated. Rather, it becomes the beginning of the river in our journey because it is here that the flow of water and the history intersect in a piece of land that *looks like a river* (See **Figure 1**). Indeed, it is the only place along any tracing of the St. Pierre that has this quality. Hemmed in by railroads and yards on three sides, and a residential neighbourhood on the fourth, the 57-hectare golf course across which the river meanders, straddles three boroughs. Surrounded by a chain-link fence and private property signage, the site was first established as a recreation facility for Canadian Pacific railway employees in the nineteenth century, but today it is owned by Groupe Pacific, a real estate developer. We passed through a gap in the fence (a hole cut by renegade dog-walkers trespassing on the golf course in the off-season) and walked down the thoroughfare. It was April and the river ran low and slow, the trees were still bare and snowdrifts were slowly melting into the turf. Mallards paddled in the parking lot's puddles and chickadees, finches, robins and crows sought refuge from the brisk breeze in the bushes and trees.

On most of the city maps drawn before the turn of the twentieth century, this part of the river lies beyond the margins or appears to trail off into a blank space. Kristen Anker notes that maps have trafficked 'in an aesthetic of empty spaces waiting to be filled by European discoveries or the implementation of their legal orders, and thus collude with the legal doctrine of a fictional *terra nullius*' (2018: 24). As 'complex, cultural, technical and semantic' practices (Cosgrove 1999: 9) European cartographic methods 'imposed an instrumental understanding of waters, lands, and peoples' (Chen 2013: 275) that were used in colonisation, and participated in perpetuating the concept of *terra nullius*. Tracey Lindberg identifies the two notions of *terra nullius* and the Doctrine of Discovery as foundational to the principles of international law that guided European colonisation of foreign land; that is, the first European nation to 'discover' a new and 'empty' territory could assert their sovereignty by merely raising a flag or occupying the territory (2010: 107). Canadian law never explicitly used either the term 'discovery' or *terra nullius*, Lindberg notes, suggesting its 'legal tradition has



Figure 1: Our first visit with the Meadowbrook Creek, 2018.

been so self-confident, so arrogant, that it felt no need to have any legal theory justifying British colonialism' (2010: 97). The mere settlement of lands by European settlers was enough to justify and legitimate settler sovereignty; despite the fact that indigenous peoples lawfully and rightfully inhabited the same territories (Lindberg 2010: 101), the notion of 'empty land' pervaded colonial settler imaginaries. The spaces left blank on early maps of Montreal are a powerful metaphor for the notion of *terra nullius* that was so necessary in justifying settler colonial invasion and occupation of indigenous lands, and subsequent claims of 'settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 5).

The landscape thus became cleared of indigenous peoples, their legal traditions and belief systems, knowledge, stories and histories to make way for settler colonialism's 'nascent histories, politics and economies' (Larsen and Johnson 2017: 105). And even as the myth of the empty frontier has become less obviously colonial practice, the visual metaphor of the empty space remains pervasive in urban planning discourses in North America, suggesting *terra nullius* has become *urbs nullius* (Coulthard 2015a). This space – what is now the Meadowbrook Golf Course – emerges on archived city maps shortly after the railroad arrived on the archipelago. In the few decades following the 1847 construction of the Montreal and Lachine railroad line, the contours of this place were increasingly defined by symbols and markings indicating railroads and highways. The negative spaces between the lines determined by different property regimes, land surveyors, and infrastructure stand in relief.

If you look at a Google map today, the only evidence of the river is the small creek that emerges from a storm drain, runs across the golf course for about 200 metres and disappears again beneath the Canadian National (CN) track and intermodal yard. But the river here is of course many things replete with many stories. The stone and brick culverts that direct the flow of the water across and beneath the ground are the legacy of nineteenth-century British-trained engineers tasked with a design for the 'management' of the water that gathered, pooled, and streamed along the southwest flanks of the mountain and intercepted the railroad at various points. The river is part of the narrative of this colonial city through various surveying and planning documents, its infrastructure development, policies and property regimes. It appears in stories of class, labour and immigration. It is a picturesque feature of recreation grounds, and a place where indigenous and non-native plants and trees, birds and small mammals animate the borders of the tracks, edges of the golf course and creek. It is also a place of contamination and of definitional struggle.

In June 2018, the Québec Court of Appeals ruled that the city of Montreal had to bury the creek. Groupe Pacific, the owners of the golf course, argued that they had first complained to the city about the creek's contamination in 2012 and nothing was done. The presence of sewage in the Meadowbrook Creek is not the result of intentional dumping as it had historically been, but the error or incompetence of plumbers and homeowners. It is estimated that there are about 200 cross connections in the neighbourhoods of Montreal-West and Côte-St-Luc that

have led to the domestic waste colonising the storm-water system, and thus the creek. The real estate developer's lawyer, referring to the watercourse as a 'ditch' and not as a creek or river, argued that the 'ditch' was fed by a storm sewer and thus could not be considered a proper river at all. Furthermore, that the city could simply cut off the flow of water and should be ordered to do so. This argument is remarkable, for embedded within it is an assumption that flows of water can be simply turned off. It ignores natural flows of rainwater and snow melt, and the importance of ditches, creeks and rivers in Montreal water management schemes, as well as the limitations of water management systems. Nikhil Anand's work on Mumbai's water infrastructure draws attention to the subterranean materiality of the environment where pipes and tunnels, culverts and cables are found, and the accumulated layers of more-than-human forms that disrupt human efforts to control and regulate (2019). The 'social life' of Montreal's pipes is one in which their interaction with one another and their environment is engaged in processes that are continually producing different relations that exceed the control of city workers and engineering designs. As river, ditch, sewer, culvert, collector and spectre, the St. Pierre has nearly been subsumed into Montreal's modern water infrastructure, nearly – though not quite – ceasing to be a river at all.

Until the mid nineteenth century, the colonial settlements along the river consisted largely of small farms, a horse racetrack, mills, tanneries and slaughterhouses. Its course had changed slightly here and there, but it was between 1860 and the early twentieth century, that the river underwent a massive transformation. Piping surface water underground was, at the time, considered the best way of dealing with the growing problem of urban waste and contamination, and marked one of the most important transitions of all large cities in the industrial revolution (Gandy 2014; Melosi 2000). While interior rivers were perceived as natural obstacles to movement between parts of the city, it was the impact of abattoirs and tanneries, and industrial and human waste on eighteenth-century waterways that was understood as posing grave public health threats (Dagenais 2017). In Montreal it was an 1832 cholera epidemic that finally forced not only an urban framework for the disposal of waste water in the city, but also, to some extent, the creation of the city itself, which incorporated only that year (Dagenais 2017: 163). One branch of the St. Pierre, that which emptied into the St. Lawrence at the epicentre of urban settlement, was the first waterway to be covered, only a few years later, and by the 1870s the city was systematically burying its rivers, its pipes moving upstream to follow the expanding settlements, and therefore contamination. While many engineers of the day (most notably Lord Chadwick in London) argued that cities should build separated sewage systems, such that storm water and sewage travelled along separate pipes, Montreal opted to save money with a single system, meaning that in most of the city, rivers, runoff, and human industrial waste all made their way into the same pipes (Gagnon 2006: 69). Over the next century, therefore, not only would Montreal's rivers all be

buried, they would for the most part cease to be rivers at all, but conduits for filth drained by rainwater.

Despite its contamination and the debate over its identity, the creek is both physically convenient (as the easiest place to find what we were looking for because it remained above ground) but also epistemologically convenient, because it's the place where the water's form most appeals to a tacit sense of *riverness* that we all had in mind when we made our maps. And it is the last place where the river is, with some caveats we'll go into below, not in fact a sewer. Far enough uphill, the drain that feeds the river from wealthy neighbourhoods was built in the mid twentieth century, and is separate from the sewage system; one of the few places in Montreal that conforms to Chadwick's proposal. For this reason, the creek is mostly storm water, while waste water runs in a parallel pipe under the turf. About a kilometre downhill from the golf course, the two waterways join in a major collector sewer, and from there the river's burial becomes all the more stark and irrecoverable.

Colonial Violence in Ville St. Pierre

After Meadowbrook, the creek empties into the combined sewer system and runs under the CN yards and terminal, and beneath a neighbourhood known today as Ville St. Pierre. When it was established in 1702, the village was named in honour of the French baron and priest, Pierre Chevrier, who, with friend and mentor Jérôme Le Royer de la Dauversière 'bought' the island of Montreal from the Company of New France in 1640. Its proximity to the river and a shallow lake, known as Lac à la Loutre (Otter Lake), would have positioned the village as a node on the fur trade route, with the leather tanneries just on the other side of the lake. The nodal quality of the river has been replaced by another sort of node: boxed in by the CN railway to the west, a steep slope known as Devil's Hill to its east (recently blocked to car traffic by the wealthier residents at the top of the hill) and, to the south, the St. Pierre Interchange.

In a small grassy lot between two roads and a squat municipal maintenance building we found five manholes. Two were located in the backyard of a home, and the others behind the fence of a municipal pumphouse that draws the sewer water up to send it over the long, flat construction yard once occupied by the lake. We could not see or feel it, but far below us we could hear the undeniable presence of rushing water, along with the predictable smell of sewer. The sounds and smells, the presence and absence, can inspire a broad spectrum of critical questions, from temporalities and mobilities of water, to the socio-technological systems designed to chart, manage and control water, and our material connections with the watershed with which we live. The voice of the water at, or rather beneath our feet, was mediated by pipes and culverts, telling a different story to the one it might once have had.

Today, the neighbourhood is a tiny island of houses and small business in a sea of infrastructure, a massive interchange built in the 1970s in the empty footprint left by the lake. The towering concrete risers and slabs that facilitate movement on east- and west-bound autoroutes

from the city to surrounding suburbs dominates the aural and visual space, and we can only guess at the levels of particulate matter and hydrocarbon, benzene and sulphur dioxide in the air. Harvey, Jensen and Morita suggest that political neglect can be identified by a paucity of infrastructure (2017: 11), but here we might propose the opposite is also true. Dominated by the highway interchange, the small neighbourhood is characterised by overabundance of infrastructure (See **Figure 2**). While infrastructure brings diverse places into interaction, it also divorces and splits others, constantly ranking, connecting and segmenting places and people (Graham and Marvin 1996, 2001; Sassen 1998, 2002). Infrastructure materialises political ideals, ideologies, and relations between different social classes and races, and gives rise to infrastructure disparities. For those inhabiting social hegemonic positions, infrastructure is often backgrounded or concealed, but for those in more marginalised social positions, infrastructure is foregrounded, either through its lack of access or its over-presence (Graham and Marvin 2001).

But even this story only gives one direction to the meaning of infrastructural time. The shadow cast over the neighbourhood by the towering interchange is emblematic of Fanon's observation that the urban planning of colonial cities is the 'violent materialization of colonialism's exploitative project' and that infrastructures 'manifest social and cultural inequalities' (Boehmer and Davis 2018: 2–3). In the historical gap between the lake and the interchange are so many other histories that

are almost impossible to see without digging further for traces. Before the interchange these were railroad yards that facilitated the transportation of goods in and out of this crucial colonial city. And the railroad yards were only possible because the lake had been drained to make the Lachine Canal, a waterway that now passes next to the interchange, repurposed for leisure. And the canal itself had been built in the early 1800s to get around the rapids on the St. Lawrence River, and the way those rapids made European boats dependent on local Mohawk navigators, the only people with enough embodied knowledge to get them past rough waters. In recent memory, therefore, the interchange was a place made of geological convenience and the easy expropriation of poorer homes. In the deeper past it was the culmination of a long colonial project that envisioned progress as the erasure of the colonised.

It's amazing how completely the indigenous history of the St. Pierre has been erased; we don't even have a name for it other than the one the French gave it on arrival. One story we encounter offers a glimpse of its relations with the Iroquois people, but it too comes shrouded in layers of colonial repurposing, memorialised today as the 'Lachine Massacre' of 1689. We encounter the story first in accounts of the building of the Lachine Canal. There's even a museum at the end of the canal where the attack is dramatised, with images and sounds of a French village being plundered and burned by Iroquois 'invaders.' But only in one account does the St. Pierre River make an appearance. In his *Canadian Pen and Ink Sketches*, John Fraser describes how Iroquois travellers used the river



Figure 2: Walking in unlikely places: highway infrastructure in Ville St. Pierre.

to bring their canoes inland before attacking the village (Fraser 1890). Learning the river was once navigable by canoe by way of such a story speaks a great deal about the kinds of narratives that are told, and not told, in Canadian history books and museums.

It is not only the obvious framing here that is the problem. The story of the Lachine massacre says nothing, for instance, about the French Army's attacks on Iroquois villages and the enslavement of 30 chiefs two years before, nor does it try to contextualise it within a genocide of millions, but focuses instead on the deaths of a handful of French settlers. The narrative participates in a 'collective mode of denial' (Cohen 2001) that closes down the subject of colonial violence, repression and exclusion (Mills 2007: 35). 'Forgetting is a fundamental element of colonial practice, and as settlers in Canada, we are constituted "in part through what we know and we are made (or made able) to forget"' (Shotwell 2016: 37). But here the ghost river speaks back to these stories, at least if one is willing to listen to it. The same river so coveted by French settlers for the building of a canal was clearly known to local Iroquois, who could paddle up it for a raid on those who had taken it from them.

A Falaise and Risky Attachments

A hole in a mangled chain-link fence behind a bowling alley offers entry into the four-kilometre escarpment known as the Falaise St. Jacques. While designated an eco-territory, the character of the site is difficult to determine: part dumping site, part green corridor for

migratory species, part division between Montreal's southwest neighbourhoods. As a steep escarpment, it defies development as much as characterisation. We scrambled down the embankment alongside cascades of discarded building material, balding car tyres, furniture and old appliances toward the pools of water at the foot of the falaise. The still water breeds mosquitoes which were thick and furious on that spring day, but perhaps the most striking thing about this place was the soundscape. There we were, in the middle of the city with a big highway, railway corridors, and the construction of a new interchange all around, and the soundscape is riotous with the songs and calls of a multitude of species of birds.

Historical maps and documents suggest that the cliff remained relatively unmodified until the beginning of the twentieth century when it began to be encroached upon by industry. In 1914, CN purchased areas along the bottom of the escarpment for railway yards, and in the late 1960s with the construction of an expressway and the Turcot Interchange, displaced earth was dumped along the falaise, widening areas and changing the line of the ridge. At the bottom of the escarpment we found interspersed pools of still water, breeding grounds for the mosquitoes that swarmed around us (See **Figure 3**). The call of birds had been drowned out by the deafening noise of big machinery. The CN tracks are being moved to accommodate a train corridor that would have connected the city centre with the airport, but those plans have changed with the construction of another light rail system that travels across the city further north, through a tunnel



Figure 3: Remnants of a river at the foot of the falaise, 2018.

in the mountain. Despite this, the reconstruction of the tracks and roadway has continued and entailed the relocation of a number of small colubrid snakes, known as Dekay (*Storeria dekayi*). They're relatively common in Ontario, Vermont, and New York State, but in Québec they are only found around Montreal. They feed on slugs, snails and earthworms, and prefer areas with long grass in open fields, places or non-places that we often perceive as wastelands, as uninhabited, waiting to be 'rescued' and developed (paperson 2014).

There was a plastic fabric fence separating the construction zone from the green edge of the escapement. We were told it was to prevent the snakes from returning to their former homes, and to encourage them to stay within the boundaries of the designated eco-territory. The effort is not entirely convincing, but it does speak to the efforts of a team of herpetologists who are working to extend and enhance the Dekay's habitat in areas around the archipelago. We returned to the falaise a number of times after that day, always on the lookout for the Dekay, but we have yet to encounter it. We realise that despite this, we have formed a sort of attachment to it. Coristine and Adams suggest the sense of ecological haunting provides potential for the protection of threatened species, that as an absence it arouses memories and conservation action (2020: 107). Instone describes such an engagement as a 'risky attachment' (2015). It is not about danger, but 'about possibilities that emerge from acknowledging our entanglements in and with things' (2015: 31). That to engage with the more-than-human is 'to face the fraught relations between multispecies coexistence and violence' (Instone and Taylor 2015: 138), and to acknowledge that we are not separate from other species, nor their precarious future.

In a similar vein, Stacy Alaimo offers the concept of 'transcorporeality' as the recognition of the self as solidly located and denies the splitting of subject and object: the subject, the knower, is never separate from the world that she seeks to know, and this calls for an ethics and politics which 'practices through and within fraught, tangled materialities' (2016: 7). Commenting on new materialist and posthumanism theories, Kim Tallbear reminds us that indigenous peoples have always thought about the vitality and sentience of nonhuman entities and that these entanglements entail relations of respect and obligation (2012). Leroy Little Bear and First Rider have expressed an indigenous philosophy in which all creation is interrelated, everything is animate and in flux (Little Bear 2012). That there 'is a tacit assumption [in aboriginal philosophy] that, in the cosmic flux, there exists a particular combination of energy waves that allow for our continuing existence. If those particular combinations of energy waves dissolve, this particular reality we are in will disappear in the flux' (Little Bear 2000: 3).

The conceptualisation of place as perpetually in flux, and the 'enmeshment of flesh with place' (Alaimo 2016: 1) holds promise for thinking about 'the moral dimension of an educational relationship with place' (Larsen and Johnson 2017: 114). Coulthard writes that the indigenous peoples' struggle for their land is 'deeply informed by what the land as a system of reciprocal relations and

obligations can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in non-dominating and nonexploitative terms' (italics in original, 2015b: 13). Perception of place as a 'field of relationships of things to each other' (Deloria 1979) opens the possibility for decolonial thought and the practice of what Coulthard calls 'grounded normativity' by which he refers to the 'modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhumans over time' (2015b: 13). The question arises, how do we, all settlers, practice a *walking-with* that advances a decolonising politics, and avoid mapping our own epistemological and ontological assumptions onto these places? How might it shape and influence our engagement with indigenous peoples, places and knowledges?

Juanita Sundberg offers three key elements to developing an ethical posthumanist politics and decolonising the discipline of geography: locating the self; learning as engagement with other; and *walking-with* (2014). The first involves what Gayatri Spivak (1990) terms 'homework': a self-reflexive activity that identifies 'the coordinates of one's location' (Sundberg 2014: 39). It is to examine how 'one's own epistemological and ontological assumptions ... have been naturalized in and through geopolitical and institutional power relations and practices' (2014: 39). It is a practice of 'unlearning' white settler ignorance and privilege which has allowed for the perpetuation of colonialism. The second is to cultivate what Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen suggests is 'multiepistemic literacy' that involves learning as a 'participatory reciprocity' (Sundberg 2014). It is not, Sundberg emphasises, the Anglo-European drive 'to know,' but learning 'as an *engagement with* the other' (2014: 40). This is to develop a dialogue with a diversity of epistemological, ethical and political approaches that works to enact a 'pluriversal' world (2014: 35). Finally, she gestures toward walking as an important practice in indigenous knowledge production and as a form of resistance against the colonial state (Sundberg references the Zapatistas and Idle No More movements), and suggests it is 'key to decolonizing in order to highlight the importance of taking steps – moving, engaging, reflecting – to *enact* decolonizing practices, understanding that decolonization is something to be aspired to and enacted rather than a state of being that may be claimed' (2014: 39).

Walking-with a ghost river demanded that we examine our own assumptions, understandings and perceptions of the city we live in, as well as our own positionality within it. We began to realise the depth of our ignorance about these places and their histories, and to identify the 'harmful disconnection from place' that characterises the colonial settler ethos (Plumwood 2008). Our path forward is tentative and experimental, but we intuit the potential for learning from these places and waters we encounter.

Ghosts of St. Henri

On the other side of the dust and din of the Turcot construction yard we pick up a trail of the ghost river in Gadbois Park. The St. Pierre was still aboveground here

until the late 1950s and was at that time a stream that local kids called *Criquet à Merde* ('shit creek'). Over the winter we came across the story of a young child who fell in here in 1956 and was swept away into the underground culvert at the end of the park. His body resurfaced three hours later at the outflow into the St. Lawrence, some four kilometres away. Standing there, listening to the rush of water from beneath a manhole, we imagined ourselves transported underground on what must have been a terrifying journey toward death.

The spectre of the child accompanied us through the streets and parks of St. Henri and Verdun as we made our way downstream toward the St. Lawrence. We encountered a couple of tributes to the river on our way toward the Lachine Canal: St. Pierre Woolnerf, a 'living street' shared by pedestrians and cars; and a garden bed that meandered across Parc Gédéon-de-Catalogue mimicking a living stream. These small acts of recognition speak to both nostalgia and an emerging collective awareness of the need to articulate not only the history of place but future imaginaries as well. A number of community and urban environmental groups have been working tirelessly for decades to establish a green corridor through southwest Montreal in order to foster the wellbeing and movement of wildlife. Alaimo (2016) asserts that in the Anthropocene, it is no longer possible to assume animals will live somewhere else, somewhere outside of the city, but rather we need to acknowledge 'animal cultures, animal memories, animal pleasures, animal homes, [and] making space for them within all-too-human landscapes' (2016: 30). The vision many community groups share, and have advocated in Montreal for, is one in which the Meadowbrook Golf Course is re-zoned as parkland, protections for the Falaise St. Jacques are established, as well as a wetland alongside the escarpment and green corridors connecting these spaces to three other parks in the southwest. This speaks to the recognition that urban environments must be understood as habitats for a multispecies population, not just humans and their pets (2016: 34).

Unsettled Endings

Eventually our ghost river takes us to a river that is anything but ghostly. The St. Pierre used to end in Verdun, throwing itself into the larger flow of the St. Lawrence River. We scrambled down a little trail and through a narrow strip of a forest to arrive at the waterside. It's the first time that we've sensed water without the mediation of underground culverts and iron manholes since we left Meadowbrook Creek. The shoreline of the St. Lawrence has changed a great deal in the past couple of centuries; years of accumulated waste dumping and landfill has extended the shore out into the river by several metres. But looking upriver, you can almost see the Lachine rapids in the distance, that piece of water that was so hard for the colonisers to tame. Downriver are the Champlain and Île-des-Soeurs bridges; their proximity has us immersed, once again, in the sound of big construction. The replacement of both bridges, along with the work on the Turcot Interchange and Bonaventure Expressway, create a disruptive chain of immense worksites, underscoring

just how much we've given over the everyday sensory pleasures of urban environments to the projects of spatial control. Framed as 'public works' and celebrated as feats of engineering, they are also the embodiment of an urban phantasmagoria (Graham and Marvin 2001: 20), attesting to international flows of finance, capital and technology; ideologies of modernity and progress, capitalist and settler-colonial logics.

We followed the small serpentine path and saw much evidence of 'nature's first engineer,' the shoreline mammal whose fur once created the financial backbone of empire. Today the beaver is back. The decline of the fur market, fewer predators and the replacement of conifer forests by deciduous forests, particularly aspen, the beaver's favourite food, has led to a burgeoning population. Over one million now live in Québec, more than has ever been recorded, and as such, we find ourselves more frequently sharing our urban places with them. The municipality has attempted to dissuade them from denuding the banks of the archipelago by wrapping wire fencing around their favourite trees, and a couple of years ago they tried trapping them, but when a dog was caught in one and died, so did that plan. The beavers don't seem to be deterred for there are a number of fallen trees, and at the end of the path where it stops at a culverted waterway, known as a tailrace, we saw a large assemblage of logs and branches. Not a dam, but perhaps a bank burrow.

Like many the interstices of this city, the edge lands along recreation spaces, the 'wastelands' of railroad yards and steep escarpments; this place offers a sense of the dynamic, and diverse 'throwntogetherness' of a place event (Massey 2005). The beavers and birds, trees and plants are in complex relationships with the infrastructure, waste and water. It was fitting perhaps that we finished at the tailrace of an old sewer, the first pipe to swallow the St. Pierre. Today the sewer has been diverted by a larger pipe, an interceptor that flows the length of the riverbank to bring the watery remnants of the St. Pierre to the treatment plant downstream (See **Figure 4**). But the tailrace still serves as an outflow when the city's waste water treatment plant is overwhelmed by high levels of storm water or snow melt. This function has earned it the nickname 'condom bay' by the kids attending the nearby technical school. Overflows are common, attesting to the limitations of our techno-modern attempts to control water. The mixing of waste water and the St. Lawrence deepens our awareness of our own watery relations with the watershed we are a part of. Astrid Neimanis' insightful work reminds us that 'we are bodies of water' continually 'drinking, urinating, sweating, transfusing, siphoning, sponging, weeping' water (2018: 55), thus intimately connected to the waters we would rather 'flush and forget' (Steinberg 2013). We are constituted of water, roughly two-thirds; we are, as Dorothy Christian suggests, 'part of the hydrological cycle, not separate from it' and that '[s]ome of the water that is in our bodies may have previously circulated in woolly mammoths millions of years ago or swelled up in a plump, juicy salmonberry, or jostled around with fish in lakes and rivers, or been processed by our local sewage treatment plant' (Christian and Wong 2010: 240). Water brings us into relation with places and



Figure 4: The tailrace in Verdun, 2018.

people, stories and narratives, ideas and the more-than-human world of the Anthropocene.

Our messy and faltering practice of *walking-with* with a ghost river was both a means of challenging the cartographic and infrastructure traditions of European colonialism and engaging with the ghostly forms of past histories in present-day urban places. Attending to the many complex spatial and temporal connections and relationships between the socio-economic, technological and the more-than-human world, enabled us to begin to develop a political epistemological practice, concerned with the production of new modes of existence: ways of living that are sustained and transformed by the recognition that we are all in relation, even to those spectres insensible to us. A mode of ethical relationing that allows us to see the ‘constellations of ideologies, affects, experiences, and contexts before they become bounded within a discrete narrative’ (Clements 2015: 106). It is to experience the complexity of place without imposing a cohesive narrative or explanation, but rather ‘staying with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016) posed by partial, fragmentary and often contradictory situated knowledges and practices, however overdetermined by settler and modernist sensibilities. It is to embrace both uncertainty and imagination as legitimate forms of inquiry in academic research, and to engage in ‘collective thinking in the presence of others’ and risk attaching ourselves to the more-than-human world in which we live (Instone 2015).

As we sat by the muddy bank of the tailrace, Kregg’s daughter tried to free some worms left in a plastic

bucket not long ago by fishers. And we were keenly aware that, just as we didn’t know what would happen to those worms, it was unclear what would happen to our knowledge of the city, to our affection for the ghost river. We had followed it but in no way had pinned it down. As Deleuze and Guattari remind us ‘following is not at all the same thing as reproducing, and one never follows to reproduce’ (1987: 372). While *walking-with* the St. Pierre we were aware that the lines we traced were more than iterations of past movement; they were invitations to future imaginaries. And yet, the ghost river also demanded a sort of faithfulness to past entities, and it was this tension, between the desire to transport the past into the present, and the impossibility of reconciling the multiplicity of the St. Pierre into a single presence, that made our urban ambulations so dynamic. As multiple trails or streams of oscillating narratives, histories and scapes, the river refuses fixity and a linear narrative. Offering a range of possible routes, connections, and digressions or detours, it brought us into contact with marginal, often inaccessible places, histories, and narratives, unsettling, but not resettling, our perceptions of the city.

Note

¹ The Ethnography Lab at Concordia University: <https://www.concordia.ca/artsci/cissc/working-groupsethnography-lab.html>. See also about the St. Pierre River, the related website: <https://ethnographylabconcordia.ca/ghostriver>.

Competing Interests

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