The Memory of Water

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Thea 414

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1. Introduction to the performance

On Tuesday December 8th I filled two buckets, each containing approximately 4 litres (10lbs) of water, from the aquifer source at Spring Ridge in Victoria, BC. I carried these on a yolk along the approximate path of the historic stream of Rock Bay Creek, which still runs in an underground culvert. The walk took about an hour and a half, and the path took me 3.6 kilometres down to the streams historic outflow into the Gorge Waterway at Rock Bay.

My act was one of symbolic daylighting. By acknowledging and following in the path of the "memory of water" through a labour of caring for the water, dissolution of identities, and documentation of the act, I seek to monumentalize the existence of the stream, and invert the monument of the perceived normality of a landscape and cultural conception where humans as perceived as separate from nature. A video documentation of the performance can be accessed at: youtu.be/xGiffuwMZsE.

Fernwood Community Association, Harris Pond / Rock Bay Watershed Awareness Program map showing the modern grid of streets overlaid with the historic path of the stream, and sites of interest, such as the locations of potential daylighting (G1, G3, G4)
thefca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/HarrisPond-RockBay-Creek-rain-gardens-and-waymarkers-v3d.pdf

2. A brief history of Rock Bay Creek

Rock Bay Creek, as it is referred to today, must have certainly had other names. It lies in the heart of the traditional territories of the Lekwungen speaking people (Songhees Nation), where they have dwelt for uncountable generations. The creek plunged over a waterfall at its terminus, into a bay where people who had come from near and far would anchor their canoes to the abundant rocks (Carolyn Knight). But in the aftermath of the arrival of a new people setting anchor in the harbour, British settlers, the Lukwungen speaking people were given little choice but to displace out of the watershed of the creek. When assimilatory policies enacted by the Canadian government sought to strip the people of this place and many others of their language, culture, and relationship to the land. They did not succeed, but some things have been lost nonetheless, including any name for the creek (Carolyn Knight).

Maps made by settlers in the days when it still ran open do not name the creek, but the pond that filled where Stanley and Vining street intersect now was labelled Harris Pond. The falls they called Finlayson (Rock Bay Creek Revival). The pond was fed by a spring sourced by an aquifer saturating a deposit of glacial gravel (Rock Bay Creek Revival). When the last glaciers retreated, they left behind pools of meltwater that formed lakes, and seeped into sediment and cracks in bedrock, forming aquifers, and springs (Kwoll, Eva. Geography 101) Harris Pond was kept filled by one of these springs. The winter rain refuelled the aquifer year after year, keeping the creek flowing as a forest grew up around it. Generations of trees came and went in a fluctuating climate before the familiar coastal residents of the present took root: cedar, fir, hemlock, maple, birch, garry oak (Renner). Along with them were other familiar inhabitants, a whole network of life radiating from the coho salmon that spawned in the stream, including the

Lukwungan that lived nearby. When the settlers came they logged extensively. In just two years between 1861 and 1863, maps show roads extending into areas which had previously been depicted with trees, and there was a sawmill at the mouth of the creek (Rock Bay Creek: a Story of Urban Watershed Revival). Hillside Farm stretched into the oaklands east of Quadra, and the stream ran through a corner, so the area was probably cleared long before it was subdivided in the 1890's.

But the same water which fed the creek from the aquifer also kept the settlers alive, as they had built a well to gather water from the spring for the growing settlement, and soon after, a pipeline which led straight to town was constructed out of hollowed old growth logs. Then the gold rush hit, and the population of Victoria exploded. By 1875, the city began using water from Elk and Beaver lake, almost 10 kilometres away (CRD). Meanwhile, the city hopped the creek and continued expanding. Industry crowded around Rock Bay, and workers filled the nearby homes. Eventually, Rock Bay would become one of the most toxic sites in Canada, with both human and industrial refuse entering it for a time (Rock Bay Creek Revival). The Victorian era solution for this was to simply cover the stream up and bury it under a road as a protection against cholera and other waterborne diseases, the likes of which had devastated London and other cities earlier in the century (Dawson).

A map from 1890 shows only two small sections of visible stream, and visible infill of Rock Bay that came with industrial activity. At some point before this, the falls were dynamited. By 1902 a map of the area shows no trace of the stream, only a grid of streets (Rock Bay Creek: a Story of Urban Watershed Revival). But the stream would not be forgotten completely - it made itself known in floods and basement leaks (Field, Personal Interview), and lots which

remained unbuilt upon as parks because they were simply too wet to build on (Rock Bay Creek Revival).

"Flooded stores at the N.W. corner of Belmont Road and Haultain Street during a January flood". Image Source: City of Victoria Archives, accessed November 2020. archives.victoria.ca/flooded-stores-at-the-n-w-corner-of-belmont-road-and-haultain-street-during-a-january-flood

The stream gave away enough of its presence in the shape of the land that in 2016 Fernwood resident Dan Doherty started to wonder about what might lie under the "grid of pavement and property" of "the city we know" (Rock Bay Creek: a Story of Urban Watershed Revival). Soon another active Fernwood resident, Dorothy Field, was collaborating on the creation of a Rock Bay Creek map with Ken Josephson from the Geography department at the University of Victoria. This mapping project grew into the Rock Bay Creek Revival project, which to date has engaged in community awareness of the creek by launching a website and facebook page; holding informative creek walks, and installing educational boards at four locations along the creeks course (Rock Bay Creek Revival). Eventually, the hope is that some of these locations

- the parks left undeveloped because they were too wet - could be sites where the creek is daylighted: uncovered and restored to a state that encourages biodiversity in surrounding areas (Lost Rivers), like has been done along several sections of Bowker Creek in Oak Bay (Bowker Creek Initiative). Daylighting is not a quick or easy process, and requires constant maintenance (Carolyn Knight), but the benefits are spread amongst both humans and nonhumans who live near streams.

David George Haskell writes about the rivers of Denver in The Song of Trees, which have been extensively restored for ecological health and public use, including the introduction of over 130km of walking and cycling trails (176). He says that: “when human movement patterns start to align with the patterns of other species...our awareness rejoins the community of life into which we are born but our built environments too often hide from us.” (176)

It is unlikely that Rock Bay Creek will run its full course in the open in the foreseeable future. It takes hundreds of years for a forest to mature, and there are new networks of life in the watershed now, my own included. But the stream will continue running as long as the rains come in the wintertime and the aquifer is able to fill and the land is shaped so that the waters flow into the stream. And that presents an opportunity. Even a small slice of open stream makes a difference for the biodiversity of an area, and the people that live in its network. By helping nature reweave itself into our cities, into our lives, the divide that has been driven between “man” and “nature” in a mind raised on colonial ideology can begin to close. My act of carrying the water, of care for the river, considers what it means to perform a unity of life, an erasing of the divide which nonetheless acknowledges the capabilities of humans to actively participate in their environments and ecologies in a way which supports and encourages their flourishing.

3. The Act

I almost grew up in Ontario, in a house my parents built themselves on a wooded lot in Barrie with a stream running through the back, but we moved to Victoria before it was finished. The house I grew up in in suburban Victoria had a gathering of six firs in a corner of the front yard, enough to pretend a forest, but no stream. One ran through a forest a few kilometres away, and I explored it eagerly, when I could, but I always wondered what it would have been like to grow up with a stream right there, in my backyard. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it ever since I discovered that Rock Bay Creek runs under the road at the foot of the hill I live on now.

Up to half of the water on earth may be older than the earth. Some of it is even older than the sun (New York Times). Water is what scientists look for when searching the cosmos for life (cite), being the source and a sustainer of life on earth. It's roughly 60% of the human body (cite), and covers the majority of earths surface, in one form or another. And it does "absolutely nothing, but be itself." (Shepherd, 23).

"That strong white stuff...so simple it frightens me" is how Nan Shepherd refers to the water which springs from the Cairngorms in her 1977 book The Living Mountain, the literary summation of the greater part of a lifetime spent exploring the granite and glacial carved range in Scotland. Central Victoria too, is based with granite and glacier carved (Dinsberg), the frozen water has impressed its memory upon the land by changing it. Nearly all landscapes are shaped by water, and primarily rivers, despite the fact that the volume of rivers only accounts for a small amount of water on the planet. Rivers, following the same courses in the land but changing them imperceptibly each time; a stone a little smoother here, a bank a little steeper

there as meanders curve and the floodplain builds up and the water cycle turns and turns (Kwoll).

Shepherd calls the strength of water its “most appalling quality” (27), and reveals an “insane impulse to hold back with my fingers a mountain spring” (28). Indeed the substance holds a power and persistence far beyond the short life of any human, or even the life of the mountain. Land may determine the waters course, but its persistence wins eventually, and even builds new land in the form of sedimentary rock (geog 103). Water is also essential for the creation of soil, watering plants which build up organic matter and weathering the parent rock (geog 103). And water, even if hidden from view, can often give away its presence by feeding taller trees.

Though water is, for the most part undying, it is not unchanging. It’s properties can be altered as a result of chemical interactions as water is an enthusiastic and universal solvent (Kwoll) . That’s how it wears away at the land, and why it is so susceptible to pollution. But this characteristic of water is also essential to the link between water and life. In her reflection on observations gathered on a rainy day spent in an Oregon forest and its river, Potawatomi Botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer remarks that “every drip...is changed by its relationship with life”. She recounts how the tannins of an Alder act to increase surface tension in a drop of water, and how the sound of water dripping from different types of trees differs; “*Sshhhhh f*rom rain, *pitpitpit* from Hemlock, *bloink* from Maple, and lastly *popp* of falling alder water.” (299) For Shepheard, the sounds of water flowing on the mountain is “integral to [the mountain] as pollen to a flower”(26). Like the streams of the Cairngorms which murmur under scrambles of boulders, the sound of Rock Bay Creek reveals its flow even when unseen. In the video

recording of my performance, I cut out all sound from the recording, pairing only the sound of a creek and increasing rain with the images of my carrying of the water. This highlights the presence of the creek under my feet as I complete the walk, and juxtaposes it against the sounds of traffic one might expect to hear from the recording, as I walk alongside busy streets of traffic.

"Most places I know," says Kimmerer "water is a discrete entity...hemmed in by well defined boundaries: lakeshores, stream banks, the great rocky coastline." (293) The line of Rock Bay Creek is visible on a map, it's watershed delineated by a dotted line...but really, what *is* the creek? Where does it begin, and where does it end? Does water cease being a part of the stream as soon as it flows into the sea? Does it become a part of the stream when it joins the main flow, or when it falls into the watershed? "Here in these misty forests" says Kimmerer, "those edges seem to blur." River and rain, presence and memory, subject and object, all these distinctions are blurred in my performance. The river is in the rain, and in the sea, as the sun draws up clouds from off the Pacific and sends them east to rain on Victoria. Who can say if it is impossible for the same water to flow down a river twice? The memory of water is also a potential future: it will gather in the same places, if given the chance, flow along the same courses. River and rain, Kimmerer calls kin, "the particular and the collective" (297) In my choice to undertake the performance on a rainy day and wear clothing which absorbed the rain, I was able to gather a small part of the rain which might have become part of the stream, were it running open. Although I was lucky that the day of the performance was not too cold, I wore a merino wool base layer to keep my body at a safe temperature.

For my choice of clothing, it was a costume in that I drew from popular imaginings of labourers from across eras by wearing overalls and boots. I also took out my piercings and did not wear my glasses, modern and identifying signifiers as they are. For carrying the water, I constructed an old fashioned yolk, furthering a historical impression. However, I did not want to appear strictly historical, as my undertaking of labour is also representative of future labours on behalf of the stream, and therefore I chose for my ensemble to be entirely black, both as a reference to mourning, especially during the Victorian era, and in order to draw attention to function over form and not visually prioritise any component aside from the buckets. They were labelled in white on black with their contents: "ROCK BAY CREEK". By mirroring the image of a setter workman who might have worked on burying the creek, I implicate my own being here as being connected to the processes of colonization, but I also acknowledge the capability for settlers to learn about the land and build a healthy connection with it, work though it may be.

I do say "work*man*" but I consider gender to be of ultimately little consequence to this performance. I am a feminist, but this performance has nothing to do with feminism. In some circles, I find that water is inexplicably feminized, and so often are ideas about what constitutes care. But I am nonbinary and performed this act as simply human. Also, it is important that not only men are implicated as being advancers of settler-colonialism, because although it is a patriarchal system, many women have been complicit in it and contributed to the oppression of others. Although I dressed in fairly loose and gender neutral clothing, being perceived as androgenus is a moving target afforded to few, and my hair is just a little too short to tie all the way back. So I expect to be perceived as feminine regardless, and know how that colours perceptions. However, perhaps the physicality of the act itself helps to neutralize the perception

of gender in the performance because physical labour is so strongly associated with the masculine. The history of colonisation is filled with figures who laboured to tame the land, like the legendary logger Paul Bunyan or another Paul, in Hermann Voaden's Hill Land, who is constantly positioned as a vital force of life in the face of a perilous wilderness. However, by acting with instead of against the forces of nature, in this case water, I reconfigure the body as an ally, and irrevocably connected to the water.

As a performance, an act(ion), the body is central to The Memory of Water. John Burnside, in his essay *Poetry as Ecology*, calls the "human body exposed, moving or standing in the open...an essentially *ecological* act." (98) He contrasts the body, the act of movement on foot, of walking against the "mounted, environmentally careless man-machine amalgam" of vehicles, which reflects how my act of walking with the water is contrasted against the passing vehicles. The tension between the vulnerability of my body and its relationship to the water, and the danger of the traffic grows to a height when I must dash across traffic, as recorded in the video documentation, in the same place where the falls would have emptied into the sea.

Burnside suggests that "on foot, we become ecologists walking... [seeing] the world as it is, not in virtual glimpses." (97) I consider walking as an essential foundation of my practice as an artist, and my practice as an artist an essential foundation for my relationship with the rest of the world. I can only speak of my long, lonely walks, but something happens as the kilometres pass. The body settles into a rhythm, the eyes and the mind look out into the world, and "one walks the flesh transparent" (Shepherd 106), body merging with being, "not bodiless, but an essential body" (106). Each time I travel a long way on foot, I'm reminded of the travels of my human ancestors, the old rhythm of waking and walking. In contrast to the whizzing, solid

masses of cars, the body is also profoundly vulnerable. Soft, and organic, and 60% water itself. A whole ecosystem, me and my millions of gut bacteria, could all come to an end with one misstep. There's an inherent tension in walking on the sidewalk, next to the road. We are used to it, but accidents happen, and there's always risk. This tension helps to highlight the fragility of the ecosystem of the watershed. The body, so much water in space, cushioning my muscles as they contract and expand step by step, also evokes a powerful and profoundly physical blurring of subject and object. I had a dream that I was asleep in the creek, nestled into the curve of a meander, the soft rush of the stream both a sound and a feeling, the boundary between body and water blurred. I carry the water, but *I am* because of water, I am so much made of water, it tells me where to go. Do I carry the water, or does the water carry me? Perhaps we hold each other, both in the grasp of gravity. In the video recording, this dissolution of the boundary between subject and object is incidentally mirrored by the camera lens acquiring water droplets along the way, distorting the image. In this too, the viewer may be reminded of their own physical relationship with water and linkage into the network of life.

This ceaseless being, ancient rhythm, and kinship with life is what I mean by the memory of water. It is read in the landscape and those who dwell there, but it also belongs to the water in its own right, as it follows after its own memory, the paths it has taken before. I am tempted to describe the performance as a mourning, also, but I'm not sure if I can really mourn something I never really knew. Perhaps I feel about it the same way I feel about the creek at the house in Ontario; as a might have, a what if? But as far as I know, that creek is still there. Maybe it's a mourning for something bigger, not just the creek but the whole disrupted network, every disrupted network, all the buried and dried out and polluted watersheds and logged trees and

lost names and people made placeless and streams empty of salmon. Maybe it's a mourning for things not yet lost too. But it is also an engagement with hope, that while this may be the first time in a long time that the water of the creeks travels under the sky as in memory, it may not be the last. Long restoration efforts at Rock Bay have lessened its toxicity significantly. Songhees First Nation now owns some of the land around the bay (Carolyn Knight). Bowker Creek provides a model for daylighting, and Rock Bay Creek still flows, though in no rush.

The reason Bowker Creek was able to be daylighted is because Oak Bay is a neighbourhood with more privilege to access the time, connections, and investments required to daylight a creek through the processes of local government. The project actually required the cooperation of three municipalities: Victoria, Saanich, and Oak Bay, as the Bowker Creek watershed encompasses all three. Although Bowker Creek has concerns of road and fertilizer runoff, it doesn't have a legacy of major industrial development around any of its waters (Bowker Creek Restoration) However, the positioning of Rock Bay Creek is emblematic of what the development of industry based on hierarchical methods of social organization such as those born from colonialism does to the communities along rivers.

The stream wells up in Fernwood. Here is the location of the city's first water source, which soon became a popular neighbourhood for the fairly well off. The Belfry Theatre, which was the local baptist church until 1971 was first constructed in 1886 (The Belfry). Nearby, large two story homes from the late 19th century are infilled by slightly smaller houses constructed later. Over time, as property values went down with aging buildings, the area became more middle class, and now has many students and renters as well as long-time homeowners. At the foot of the first hill the stream tumbled down, the Oaklands neighbourhood - aptly named with

many trees- is similarly middle class. The names of many streets along the route are notable too: Cook, Quadra, Blanchard, Douglas, all men involved in the colonising process.

Moving downstream, the busy thoroughfares of Cook and then Quadra Street signal a change. Aging apartment buildings spring up with the increasing buzz on traffic. Closer to the site of industry, incomes are historically lower (Dawson). The path of the water through economic levels demonstrates the positive feedback loop of the destruction of a hierarchical and divided system. David George Haskell says that "when we believe in duality, we create duality in the world. If we think that the city is unnatural, then it follows that the urban river water has fallen from its natural condition. Being already 'trammelled' the water may then serve as a garbage chute." The problem is, if someone upstream chooses to pollute a river, those downstream are stuck with the dirty water, and with little resources to fix it, or power to change the behavior of those upstream. And the river, already polluted, flooding with muddy clay, the forest long gone, hardly seems like it could ever be something that you would drink, that you would take in as a part of yourself to sustain life, that would become a part of you.

"As the landscape's duality grows, it gets harder to perceive that humans belong in the world." Says Haskell (178). By imposing a duality on the landscape of one's life, a duality which is heightened for the urban working class and poor, in terms of access to the time and money which allows those with more privilege to access nature more easily. After the little park on Wark Street in Quadra Village, about two thirds of the way along the creek's path, there are no more parks, and the trees become fewer, but there's a lineup outside the Bottle Depot on Queens of people carrying their belongings in shopping carts. Those upstream did not only divide those downstream from the environment, but also from each other.

However, water is the very essence of connection, it bonds together ecosystems, communities, life. Basia Irland's epic project *A Gathering of Waters: The Rio Grande, Source to Sea*, operates within the community aspect of the connecting power of water. This undertaking spanned five years, and some three thousand, and involved hundreds of people. Water was gathered at various points along the river and stored in a canteen which was passed down the river along with a logbook from community to community (Irland). Some parts of the Rio Grande have dried up, and the river no longer consistently runs source to sea . This project was an act of collective care for the river, and a recognition of its memory. The carrying and continuance of water over the dried up sections of the Rio Grande is similar to my carrying of the water under the sky, "remembering" the journey it used to take, and helping it repeat the journey to carry on the memory.

The power of performance to manifest care is unique, in that it allows animation of the action of caring, amplified by the identification with the performer/s by the audience. Sister Simon Roach, a professional nurse and theorist on caring, described caring as "the human mode of being"(2), and speaks about "the activity or performance of caring as manifested in specific caring behaviors."(1) These behaviours include actions based in Roaches 5 C's of Caring, the first being *Compassion*, which she describes as "*a way of living born out of an awareness of ones relationship to all living creatures; engendering a response of participation in the experience of another; a sensitivity to the pain and brokenness of the other, a quality of presence which allows one to share with and make room for the other."* (Roache, 19/20) My act of labour in carrying the water is an inversion of the labour carried out which logged the watershed and covered the creek, and a foreshadowing of the labour it would take to care for the creek if it

was daylighted. But it is also an act of compassion, and connectedness. By making a choice to carry the water, I respond to and participate in the life of the stream, the community of the watershed, and the memory of the water. By existing as a symbolic act, it opens up possibilities for other modes and visions of caring beyond the physical act of that which is seen, like how the exposure of the water opens up other visions of how its course could change, beyond the confines of the culvert.

For many people in Canadian cities, and in cities around the world, the vision of urban development is so constant and normal that we forget so much of it is so new. This normality is a monument to the powers and processes of colonialism which led to the destruction of the natural environment in the watershed and the culverting of the creek. By remembering the creek which has been forgotten, and embodying and juxtaposing the memories and fortellings of opposing actions, this act of inverted monumentalization reveals just how much the impression of normality on the streets of Victoria obscures an understanding of the landscape . By learning to recognize the changes in the landscape and how they came about, settlers are able to gain greater perspective on the breadth and depth of the impacts of colonialism on the land they live on, and their placement in the ongoing history.

Robin Wall Kimmerer says that “It’s not just land that is broken, but more importantly, our relationship to land”(9) By coming to know the land, by recognizing a river, by caring for it and it’s whole network of life, and by including humans in that life, the boundary blurred, like the one between my body and the water. The human body in an open space is an ecological act (Burnside) because it is a recognition that “We too are nature. Unsunderable.” (Haskell 177) the

relationship can begin to be healed. Rock Bay Creek may be buried, for now. But the waters flow in living memory, and there is much that they can teach us.

Screen captures of the video recording of the walk, alongside roads. Image Source: Rock Bay Creek: The Memory of Water, accessed January 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGiffuwMZsE&feature=youtu.be

Screen captures of the video recording of the end of the walk, with Rock Bay in the background. . Image Source: Rock Bay Creek: The Memory of Water, accessed January 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGiffuwMZsE&feature=youtu.be

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