MAKING KIN

by

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ABSTRACT

In this document, I outline the research, theory and practice that are the foundation of my work with the more-than-human world. I draw on the theoretical discussions of what constitutes a person, the inherent vitality of thing power and ideas about kinship and multi-species survival to investigate how we might move towards a glimmer of poly-ontological possibility. The body of work described in this text is an attempt to concurrently experience, facilitate and chronicle my interactions in material form through the creation of objects that serve as both agents and archives. I utilize ceremonial field studies that involve approaching the subject with openness to whatever might transpire, and studio practices with materials that refer to a homesteading vernacular. As a woman of both settler and Indigenous ancestry, I explore my relationship to the more-than-human from a place that straddles, and honours, different cultures and ontologies.

There are many ways to create kin, and in this paper I present several potential avenues. Reflecting on the writings of Priscilla Stuckey, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway and Zoe Todd, I propose that we need to adapt our approach to encounters with human and non-human alike in order to be in solidarity with one another as we begin to structure a collaborative response to our unknown future.

My research reflects a sensibility that believes in ethics, is concerned with our relationship to nature, is socially oriented and seeks a kind of in-betweeness. To further my understanding of how we might transform mythologies, language and definitions, and to situate my practice within a thinking within a broader artistic and theoretical context, I refer to contemporary artists centralizing relationships with the more-than-human world, including Rebecca Belmore, Marcus Coates and Tanya Willard.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my human kin:

My supervisor, Randy Lee Cutler, for her tough questions and deep understanding, and the rest of my graduate committee, Ingrid Koenig, Trish Kelly and Jesse Birch, for their time and consideration

My cohort, specifically Peter Sickert, Jess Portfleet and Fiona Moes Pel for their support and generative conversations

My xʷɛʔɛt̓ay (Lasqueti Island) community, for holding space

My son, for showing me what commitment to practice looks like

My mother and grandmother, for the wonder and the trauma

My partner, there are no words

To my more-than-human kin:

My dog friends, Pippa and Gus, who teach me daily

Mama Fir, my backbone

The Salish Sea, who holds me

xʷɛʔɛt̓ay (Lasqueti Island), where I have the privilege of stewarding land

The unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səl̓ílwətaʔɬ /Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations, where I am a guest filled with love and respect. Warrior up.

We need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections.

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

Knowing is a direct material engagement, a practice of intra-acting with the world as part of the world in its dynamic material configuring, its ongoing articulation…Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are a part, including new configurations, new configurations, new possibilities- even the smallest cuts matter.

Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

Kindness is a goddamn art.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *This Accident of Being Lost*

INTRODUCTION

I am seven years old. My mother keeps bees in Langley. The path to the hives winds through the dappled light of a deciduous forest. I always fall behind, distracted by the softness of the moss under my hands or the sow bugs on the log or the sky. When we arrive at the hives, the thrum resonates in my chest. I lean against the back of a hive, sit very still as bees land on my bare legs then continue on their way.

*

My art practice is both provisional and contingent. It consists of listening, being present, embodying, writing, researching and archiving. Making kin involves being vulnerable and engaged, and an attitude of receptivity that is in sharp contrast to the aloof irony characteristic of our current era. This thesis weaves my ongoing research identifying ontologies that have the capacity to shift our relationship to the more-than-human[1] and the unfolding of my methodological process, with contemplation of the artwork itself. Throughout the text you will find questions, and while I might not be able to answer them all, I consider ongoing inquiry integral to my art practice.

The document is organized by action. SITUATE describes my positionality, sharing some of my background, the origins of my practice and key elements that inform my making. TRANSMUTE AND COLLABORATE delineate my method and methodology. Specifically, TRANSMUTE gives an overview of the work that led up to the thesis project and paper, and chronicles my research into materiality, starting with pre-thesis work and moving into thesis work at the end of the section. COLLABORATE illustrates my investigation into collaboration and contamination and also describes thesis work. Both TRANSMUTE and COLLABORATE include references to artists whose work has resonated with me.

[1] more-than-human is a term first coined by ecological philosopher David Abram in the mid-1990's as a way to talk about the natural world.

SITUATE

I have spent much of my life alone and in conversation with the natural world. I have observed and contemplated, and quietly interacted with the more-than-human, the beings – both animate and inanimate- with whom we share this world. I have archived my relationships by collecting and making all manner of objects- from driftwood and rocks to drawings and poems. I have been searching for a narrative that would help me understand my place in the world, ultimately re-enacting and embodying many of traditional stories learned through dress-up and imaginative play. The most significant of these stories was *the She-Wolf of Tsla-a-wat*, where I transformed into a she-wolf and raised a human cub (my brother). It was the wolf pelt, a sport kill of my father's, which secured the metamorphosis. I draped it over myself, with its head on my head and felt the vibrancy of the pelt. The haptic experience of the power of the pelt, coupled with the transmutational potential of narrative, were the original points of access to what would become my art practice. I wanted to occupy this space, this liminal zone between real and unseen, translating embodied experience and social dynamics into material form.

Fig. 1. little Jennifer with fawn

I was born and raised on the West Coast, in ləʔamɛn (Tla'amin) territory and the unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səl̓ílwətaʔɬ /Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations. I come from both settler and Indigenous ancestry. My Cherokee and Quaker great-grandparents made their way across the United States, settling in Alaska. This bloodline then mixed with Scottish, English and Irish, and created a second generation Canadian, a newcomer and a guest. My relationship to the coast is complex, formed by intimate interactions with specific places and an ongoing resistance to capitalist and colonialist power structures that was instilled by my mother, a lay midwife and activist.

My work is informed by the combined reality of living rurally and in the city, as well as the transition between the two. Living off the grid half the time, I am acutely aware of the need to manage resources, understand systems and cultivate and maintain kinship. Returning to the city, my dependence of urban infrastructure heightens my feelings of vulnerability and responsibility. Many of the materials I use reflect a homesteading or craft vernacular, including lumber, beeswax, textiles, and ceramics. I utilize my skills as a maker, repurposing found materials and shaping raw ones.

My meditative practice, pagan upbringing and Waldorf education have taught me to be present and patient, have led me to trust my intuition and be cognizant of the agency that exists in other beings. I have questions and concerns about how we interrelate and how we inhabit our world. These push me to re-examine the western framework that has formed contemporary society, to find the ideas that value connection and kinship, and to work to recover what has been lost. Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, who introduced innovative social reforms at the beginning of the 20th century that included the development of the Waldorf school curriculum, said "All existence is spirit; just as ice is water, so matter is also spirit. Mineral, vegetable, animal or human – all are

condensed form of spirit" [2]. Steiner challenged many dominant institutions of his time and aspired, through his educational philosophy, to create freethinking human beings. I am fortunate to have been exposed to this variation of western thought, and the inherent centrality of narrative that exists within Waldorf education. As a result, I choose to situate myself in a different knowledge set, one that has room for relationship, spirit, will and kinship.

When I began the MFA program, my art practice was centred around meditative mark making on textiles and ceramics, and exploring and recording the agency of water through dyeing processes. The past two years have resulted in a shift in my way of working and the direction of the research for this thesis. Theory plays a much more significant role, and the work that is the most inspirational often lands in an interstitial zone between disciplines or ontologies. This change in direction reflects a renewed relationship with materials, ideas, spaces and collaborators and careful attention to the seen and unseen forces so relevant to my childhood experiences. In order to visit with the beings and forces that make up the more-than-human world, it is important to extend consciousness and sensory awareness[3] outward as well as inward. As is necessary with any practice that rubs up against the unseen, I suspend disbelief and move away from the need for some kind of empirical, infallible evidence to a receptivity that allows for knowing that is subtle and embodied. This awareness also makes room for narrative to emerge that is guided by intuition and imagination and makes connections between the inhabitants of the human and more-than-human world. My positionality will be woven into this text through referencing the influence of early

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[2] Steiner, Rudolf, A. R. Meuss, and Urs Dietler. *True Knowledge of the Christ : Theosophy and Rosicrucianism - the Gospel of John*(12)

[3] Sensory awareness includes the common five senses plus the additional seven proposed by Rudolf Steiner. They are divided into three groups; those senses that pertain to the body – touch, life, movement and balance; those that pertain to the external world –smell, sight, taste and temperature and those that pertain to the immaterial –hearing, speech, thought and ego. This information comes from oral lectures given during Waldorf teacher training.

archival practices as a means of recording relationship with these beings and the haptic power and vibrant materiality of objects. In addition, the importance of a composite ontology serves to situate my thinking within a broader artistic and theoretical context.

TRANSMUTE

There are several waypoints during the program that served to guide the practice that would become the focus of my MFA work. The seed of my thesis lay in the furtive[4] interventions and ephemeral pieces that took place in marginalized[5] spaces. The first key point occurred early on, when I rediscovered the importance of connecting with site. Concurrent to this development was the recognition of object-making as a means to record the sensory information obtained during these visits. The challenge became how to create a relationship between the interventions that were left in the location, and the installations that developed in the studio or gallery. *Civic Union I* (figs. 2 & 3), consisted of visiting the site, returning to the studio to fabricate the objects and placing them back in the landscape. I then accurately mapped and indexed the exterior work in order to translate the intervention into an inside installation. As the series continued, the resulting objects took on a museological quality, as seen in *Civic Union II* (figs. 4 & 5).

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[4] A furtive act can be identified by "its intentionality, its use of language and myth-making, its quality of resistance, its specificity to the site in which it takes place, and (…) by the fact it is done without permission" (Ritter 10)
Ritter, Kathleen. *How to Recognize a Furtive Practice: A User's Guide*

[5] marginal: of, relating to, or situated at a margin or border; not of central importance; occupying the borderland of a relatively stable territorial or cultural area; located at the fringe of consciousness. Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marginal

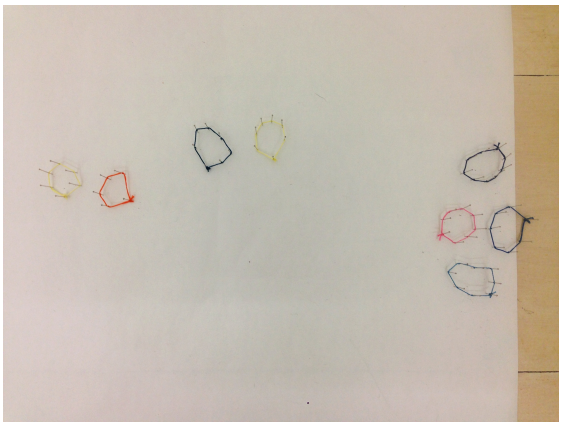

Fig. 2 & 3. *Civic Union I* / site specific material intervention with studio translation / porcelain, thread, pins / Dimensions variable / 2016 / photos: Jennifer Brant

Fig. 4 & 5. Detail / *Civic Union II* / porcelain, found root, gold leaf, plywood, nails / Dimensions variable / 2016 / photos: Jennifer Brant

This was significant because it became clear the objects informed one another, and at the same time, the distance that occurred through organization and categorization led to my questioning what was at stake for me. What means were there to deepen the relationships to the places and entities I was visiting? What theories and ontologies centralized the relationship to both the more-than-human and the vibrancy of objects?

The final waypoint in my pre-thesis work involved a re-examination of imbuing objects with vitality. Up until this point, I would have confidently said that I was accessing the sensory information gathered while out in the world and transmuting it into the objects through handwork. However, it was the embodied experience of a near-fatal boat accident, and the subsequent recovery facilitated by intuitive making through the artwork *impossible mending* (fig. 6), that illuminated the degree to which I had to feel experiences in my body in order to successfully transfer them into made objects. I understood in a new way that my connection to body and hands is essential to research and production and that my body is both an archive and a facilitator. Several questions arose as a direct result of this breakthrough. How can embodied experience be translated into an object? How do the objects we interact with transform us and in what ways do objects change each other?

Fig. 6. *impossible mending* / cotton fabric, wax, thread, pins / Dimensions variable / 2017 / photo: Jennifer Brant

I was initially drawn to the work of author Jane Bennett. In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things,* Bennett describes an encounter she has with several disparate objects where she experiences an "energetic vitality"[6]. She refers to a kind of wildness, that she calls uncanny, which transpires when an assemblage of objects interact with one another. In order for objects to shift into things, replete with thing-power, Bennett asserts that we must bring sensory and intuitive openness to our encounters. We are all actants[7] in these situations, whether human or not. When I brought my attention to the objects in my studio in the way Bennett described, they began to converse with one another in unexpected ways. In the installation *the impossibility of total knowledge* (fig. 7), I expanded on *impossible mending* in order to explore embodied and epigenetically transferred anxiety using textiles, objects, and drawing. The interaction between the elements in the installation was dynamic, and feedback from colleagues and viewers alike confirmed the potency of the assemblage[8].

I continued to work with these ideas for the interim thesis show, which culminated in the installation, *how to sustain a condition of radical uncertainty* (fig. 8) and the amalgamation of drawing and textiles into one artwork. The quilt pattern was based on a map of my anxieties, similar to what I had drawn on the wall, and was imbued with the energetic residue of meditative stitching as well as vivid materiality of its thing-power.

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[6] Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant matter: A Political Ecology of Things*

[7] a term coined by Bruno Latour, whose actor-network theory suggests that a rhizomatic framework is formed from the relationships between humans and non-humans within a social world. Within this world, actants can be described as the source of any action. They can be human or not human, have agency and contribute to relations

[8] assemblage refers to the collection of objects in the installation as well as the theories of Manual DeLanda, who posits that inorganic matter has self-organizational abilities.

While Bennett's articulation of the relationship between objects was encouraging, it neglected other ontologies that have never lost the ability to recognize relations. Surely there was a way to move from a distinctly Western conceptualization towards a glimmer of poly-ontological possibility or even to the centralizing of indigenous ontology. This is important to me personally because of my ancestry and friendships, but also because I feel it is essential that we do everything we can to facilitate widespread decolonization. It makes sense to pay close attention to the experience and knowledge of those who have never severed their connection with the natural world.

Fig. 7. *the impossibility of total knowledge* / cotton and silk fabric, wax, found wood, pencil crayon, paint / Dimensions variable / 2017 / photo: Jennifer Brant

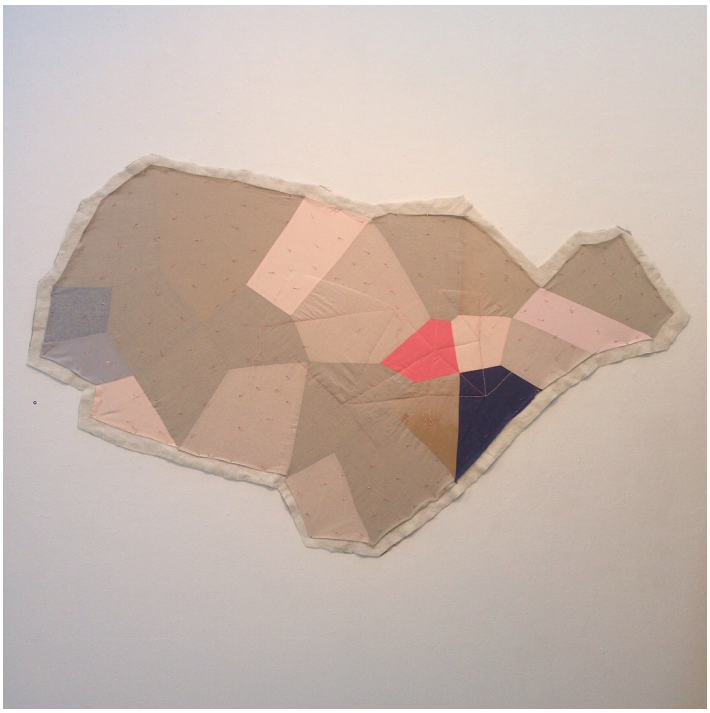

Fig. 8. Detail, *how to sustain a condition of radical uncertainty* / cotton and linen fabric, thread, batting, copper pins / Dimensions variable / 2017 / photo: Jennifer Brant

Philosopher Priscilla Stuckey was the first author I discovered that referenced indigenous scholarship. She advocates for broadening the definition of the term "person". In her article *Being Known by a Birch Tree: Animist Refigurings of Western Epistemology* Stuckey posits an animist framework that extends the definition to include beings that would generally be considered inanimate.

> Persons are volitional, relational, cultural and social beings. They demonstrate intentionality and agency with varying degrees of autonomy and freedom. Persons are those who relate, and especially those who communicate. Persons may be spoken *with*. Objects, by contrast, are usually spoken *about*.[9]

[9] Stuckey, Priscilla. *On being known by a Birch Tree*. (190)

Persons may be found in any manner of material form; the stuff that they are made of does not determine their personhood. What defines a person is whether or not they engage in relationship. Stuckey's animist framework proposes that persons can know us as we know them. As my practice is informed by paying attention and making room for knowing, this theory led me to further explore material vibrancy coupled with coming to know specific landmarks in my immediate environment.

Fig. 9. *Faultline…* /clay slip / 2017 / photo: Jennifer Brant

Fig. 10. *blue intervention no.2* / mineral pigment for colouring soap / 2017 / photo: Jennifer Brant

For *Faultline: Long Bay to Boat Cove (mapping my anxieties)* (fig.9), I used clay slip to demarcate a fault line that runs roughly across the middle of the island. The intention of the intervention was two-fold; I wanted to engage with an active geological formation while acknowledging and highlighting it as a source of anxiety. With *blue intervention no.1* (fig.10), I contemplated the nature of potholes, in particular the way they force us to slow down and pay attention. By making the holes blue, I attempted to emphasize their nature and suggest a further slowing down. While the animacy of a pothole is open for debate, it is a phenomenon that shifts our behaviour, causing us to act in a

particular way. In that sense, we are in relationship with it and we are known to each other.

Both potholes and faultlines are part of the landscape, and these works, when combined with my earlier acts of tenderness, point to my desire to know not only the entities that live in and on the land but the land itself. Indigenous scholar Zoe Todd, writing for the anthology *Art in the Anthropocene*, references the work of Haudenosaudee and Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts. Watts describes the land as a thinking, living entity from which all other beings, human and non-human alike, acquire their means of operating in the world. The land is the source; it is that from which all thoughts and actions rise. Of particular note, and one that resonates with me, is Watts' suggestion that we "think of agency as being tied to spirit, and (as) spirit exists in all things, all things have agency"[10]. Watts rejects Latour's term actant, as it limits the agency of the non-human to their interaction with humans. Todd goes on to assert that materials are "enlivened with will, knowing and sentience"[11] (248). This ontology is familiar, overlapping with both my Waldorf education and my pagan upbringing, and is a reflection of my experience of the world. It serves as a welcome framework for what I am currently producing for the MFA graduate exhibition, which will be discussed for the remainder of the document. It is also a pre-cursor for collaboration with the more-than-human. Can an artistic approach that reflects a poly-ontology allow for what has otherwise been called a hybrid or interdisciplinary[12] practice?

[10] Turpin, Etienne, and Heather Davis. *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. (46)
[11] Ibid. (248)
[12] hybrid or interdisciplinary practice refers to a contemporary practice that dissolves boundaries between disciplines such as art and science or art and technology in order to research and articulate emerging concepts

THESIS WORK

In the fall of 2017, I participated in a themed residency in Wexford County, Ireland. This time abroad was incredibly generative and many of the ideas that have become my thesis project emerged or were further developed during this time. It was here that I began the acts of attention that led to braiding and listening, as well as the mapping of energetic relationships. I was diligent in my approach, making an offering with each interaction and drawing on the land rituals I had practiced for decades. Concurrently, I researched stories and histories, as well as the names of unfamiliar plants and the make up of the rock and soil beneath my feet.

Before my residency, I spent a week in Iceland and my time there was marked by immersion in the vibrancy of the geology. It was there that I began to listen to rocks and boulders, leaning in close and pressing my ear against their craggy surface. The Huldufólk (hidden folk) of Iceland are believed to live in rocks, and unlike most Western folk tales that have been relegated to fairy tale status, a significant portion of the Icelandic population continue believe the Huldufólk exist. This cultural openness to the more-than-human made investigations into and conversations with geological entities much easier. I began to think about erratic boulders[13], and wondered about the stories they hold. Erratics are witnesses and sentinels; by bringing our attention to what they have seen, we might be able to connect to a vast repository of knowledge. What journey has this rock taken? What has it seen? What physical object could I create that might be a material intermediary between the boulder and myself? What kind of device could act as an interface and guide my listening?

[13] an erratic is a rock or boulder that differs from the surrounding rock and is believed to have travelled and been deposited through glacial action.

I refined my method of listening upon returning to Canada. I began working on *erratic rock stories: listening.* I visited with erratic rocks located in Southwestern British Columbia and on Vancouver Island. These boulders are geologically out of place. They have become landscape artifacts because they are not where they are supposed be; they are travelers. For this particular piece, I made three listening devices, specifically formed to fit three erratic boulders: one in Coquitlam, one on Hollyburn Mountain and one in Abbotsford. I thought about one of the most intimate of listening acts, finding the heartbeat of a fetus, and I loosely modeled the device on the Pinard horn[14], fashioning a cone-shaped device by casting clay slip in a plaster mould. After making an impression of an area of the boulder with silicone putty, I returned to the studio and created a second mould for the interface between boulder and device that I cast in beeswax. While it might seem like a lot of work for each boulder, I want to emphasize that I am approaching individual boulders to listen to their specific stories. I consider the element of care I bring when I spend this much time with an erratic to be important to the process. Clay and beeswax are materials that I repeatedly use in my practice both due to their malleability and capacity for taking on specific shapes and the vitality that resonates from them. They are non-toxic materials that reflect the homesteading vernacular I referenced earlier in the paper. The cast interfaces fit perfectly against the surface of the boulder. The devices measured nine inches in length, with the large end about seven inches in diameter. When they were used in situ, they were held in the hand. In the gallery, two sat on a wooden stand located on a shelf, and one was in a felt holder, ready to go into the field (fig.12). While in situ, the devices served to bring the participant in proximity to the boulder and acted as an invitation to engage in listening. In the gallery, their materiality held the residue of the encounter and the faint whisper of the boulder's story.

[14] a stethoscope used to hear the fetal heartbeat

Fig. 11. experimentation– *erratic rock stories: listening* / clay prototype, preliminary listening / 2018 / photo: Ian Giles

Fig. 12. *erratic rock stories: listening* / clay, beeswax, wood, felt, linen / Dimensions variable / 2018 / photo: Jennifer Brant

Fig. 13. detail - *erratic rock stories: listening* / clay, beeswax, wood, felt, linen / 2018 / photo: Jennifer Brant

Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore has also facilitated listening, though she has focused on specific sites. In her work for LandMarks 2017 she created *Wave Sounds*, a series affecting sculptures that operate as amplifiers for four environments: Banff National Park, Pukaskwa National Park, Georgian Bay Islands National Park, and Gros Morne National Park. Each unique shape emulates the surface of a rock and is designed to fit into the landscape; they "encourage us to hear and consider the land and our relationship to the land" (LandMarks 2017 website). Belmore's interest in listening, her concern for the future of all people, and her desire to inspire communication and cooperation, all the while directing an unflinching and critical gaze at colonial institutions, serve as "an invitation for human cognition to move across the same boundaries that stone and water traverse with ease".[15]

[15] Horton, Jessica L. and Janet Catherine Berlo. *Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and 'New Materialism' in Contemporary Art.* (28)

Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are all the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while and then replied,
'No, but some are.'

Anthropologist Irving Hallowell, 1960[16]

When I listen, I dissolve boundaries by ingesting bits of another's story. I have the opportunity become a witness and ally to human and more-than-human alike. While Belmore is asking the question "do we take sound for granted?" I am interested in what can transpire when I bring my full attention to the boulder that is in front of me. I am also interested in the power of the listening device to hold the energy of the encounter. I am reminded of the words of Shawn Wilson, in his book *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. There he says, "the distance or relationship between us and the environment is sacred, and so you do ceremonies to bridge that space or distance".[17] Whether we are working with the bigger landscape or individual elements within it, bridging space is much like making kin, as will be discussed later in the document; it requires patience and presence. If we are to bridge the distance between ourselves and the more-than-human world, the first step is to bring our attention to that which is in front of us; we need an entrance point, a set of circumstances or objects that lend themselves to a different way of experiencing, interacting and understanding. I see my work as that entrance point. The ability to expand the definition of person and relate differently to beings previously considered inanimate is a precursor to collaboration, and by extension, making kin. We have the capacity to understand and open up to the way others are in the world. We have imagination and compassion, both of which are tools that can give access to the multitude of perspectives, and allow us to embody them.

[16] Hallowell, A Irving. *Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View* (24)
[17] Wilson, Shawn. *Research is Ceremony : Indigenous Research Methods.* (87)

COLLABORATE

When two or more entities work together, they are collaborating. We collaborate with earthworms to make compost, yeasts to make bread, molds to make cheese and with the microbiota in our gut to support our immune and hormonal functioning. In our anthropocentric world, these constant collaborations are often overlooked, subsumed into the machinations of human activity and self-importance. We need only to look to our own bodies to understand that we are created as much from bacteria and microbes as we are from cells. We are already an interdependent species; our emotional states, thinking and even our ability to connect with our community are all affected, and often directly linked, to our micrbiome. Given the growing neuroscientific evidence on the connection between our gut and how we think, and increasing feelings of isolation and disconnect from each other and place, safeguarding the collaboration between bacteria and ourselves seems prudent.

Collaboration has become a contemporary catch phrase, particularly in business where it is heralded as a way to increase productivity and efficiency. However, if we were to examine collaboration using the framework of our relationship with our microbiome, we would find that a completely different set of values emerge. It is this relationship I have aimed to invoke for the production of my thesis project. I would like to lead into my work by introducing the Dark Mountain Project as their manifesto and collaborative publications and events served as a catalyst for my thinking and making. Born out of two years of conversations between writers Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, the Dark Mountain Project is an organization whose aim is to give voice to what they describe as "uncivilized" writers, artists, musicians and other creatives. Uncivilized is a word that is being used more frequently to describe those who choose not to subscribe to the myths of progress and nature currently held by capitalist society. The relevance of the Dark Mountain Project is two-fold. Firstly, the organization itself is collaborative and all projects are undertaken and supported by a rhizomatic contingent of individuals.

Secondly, they are committed to challenging the stories that keep us separate from "nature". At the core of their manifesto is a call for alternatives to the current paradigm. They want to change how we relate to, and work with, the more-than-human. They are an example of how we might begin to structure a collaborative response to our unknown future.

Whether it is possible to disrupt the status quo and reimagine our relationships in time to interrupt the course we are on remains to be seen, as it will require a committed ontological shift. However, we might be able to facilitate this transition by first examining what is 'human' in philosophical terms. Both Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti occupy nodes on a metaphysical rhizome, and they describe and carefully deconstruct dominant systems of thought. Underlying much of my work is a desire to interrupt systems in order to consider and make room for other ones. Making kin is rhizomatic; it is the development of a network, which is synonymous with a system. To network means to make connections and interact, a precursor to collaboration.

The impetus for *bird conversation: wren* came from the intersection of the theoretical investigations of posthumanist and feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti and the simple ritual of sitting outside and listening to birdsong. In her text *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* Braidotti asked whether human differences – ethnic, gender, or cultural – can be understood outside the constructions of binaries and hierarchies. Most recently, she has taken this questioning further to include non-human entities. She suggests that the post-human subject is "materially embedded, multi-layered, a nomadic entity, and engaged in inter-relations with human and non-human agents" (Braidotti, web). How can we facilitate, in Braidotti's words, "a downsizing of human arrogance coupled with an acknowledgement of solidarity with multiple others?" (Braidotti, web). If we do not "downsize our human arrogance" we will not be able to relate to other beings. It is impossible to bridge a gap and acknowledge or centralize other ontologies if we

continue to consider our species as superior to others. I chose to embody this downsizing by engaging with the vulnerability I feel while singing and using my own voice to attempt to communicate with a pacific wren. Given the studies showing the similarities between the way young humans and young songbirds learn to vocalize, there are clearly commonalities in how we make sound. That does not guarantee understanding, though, and if communication between humans is challenging, would communication between such different species as humans and birds even be possible? Was it possible to sing the song in a way that a wren would understand? If nothing else, would the wren recognize my intention? Solidarity is rich territory for developing collaborative strategies. It is synonymous with consensus and like-mindedness, and coming from this place, collaboration seems a natural evolution.

The work consisted of slowing down the wren's song to a speed that was possible to sing and having a composer transcribe it into standard notation (fig.14). I started practicing the song, recorded, sped it up and played it in the adjacent Douglas fir forest. I was interested in the way emotion is conveyed through sound, specifically song, by birds and humans alike. In what ways might this music, this art, allow the animal in me to meet the animal that is the wren? What would be lost in translation?

At the same time, I had revisited R. Murray Schaeffer deeply affecting choral work, *Snowforms*. Schaeffer used non-standard notation, and the score reads like a musical line drawing. Exploring whether there was a way of notating that would more accurately describe the spirit of the wren's song became an important part of the piece. I was curious about what other information might be revealed in a different form of the score.

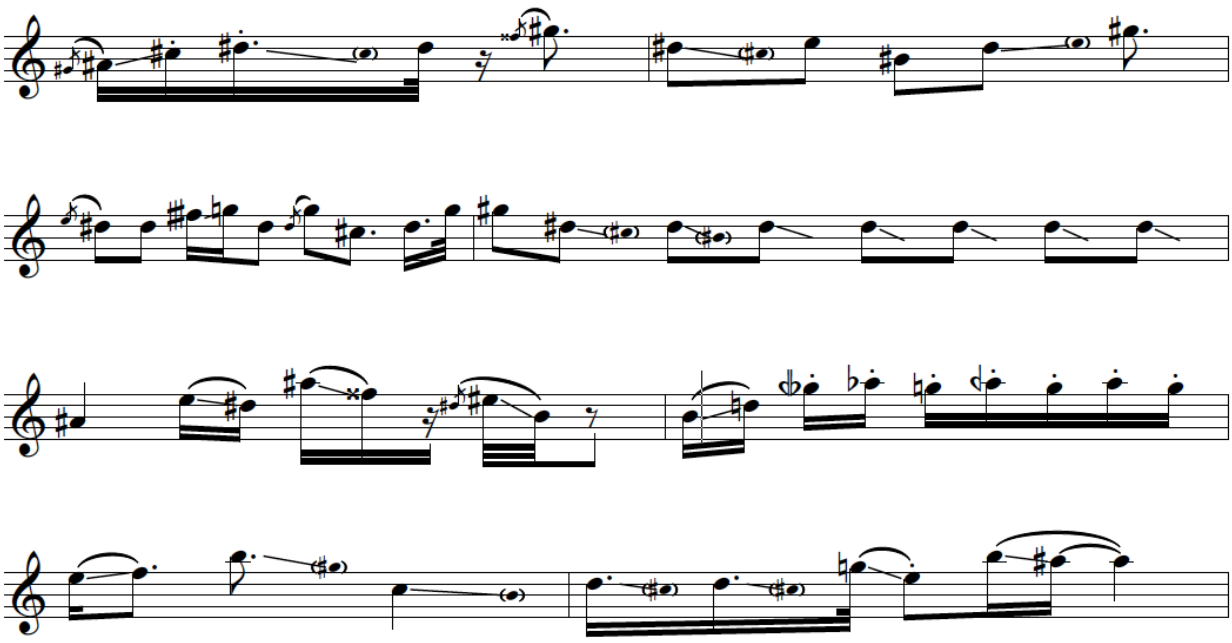

Fig. 14. standard notation of *bird conversation: wren*

In order for the experience of the birdsong to be an intimate one, I built a blind that encapsulated the head and torso of the viewer. The blind was constructed from cedar and pine and lined with a felt that was made of leftover fabric scraps, much like what a bird might collect for a nest. The song was made audible through triggering a motion-activated speaker set inside the blind, behind the felt. One opening in the blind framed the score, which was placed on an adjacent wall (fig.15).

Fig. 15. *bird conversation: wren /* cedar, pine, felt, audio of artist singing birdsong, score / Dimensions variable / 2018 / photo: Jennifer Brant

There are many artists who have utilized or found inspiration in birdsong. In his work for the exhibition *Voicing,* presented locally at the New Media Gallery in New Westminster last fall, British artist Marcus Coates installed a work with a theme and a method of production similar to mine, though far more elaborate. With *Dawn Chorus,* Coates created an immersive installation involving sound and video in which the recorded birdsong of fourteen birds singing together at dawn is slowed down to a drone and given to amateur singers to sing. They were filmed singing their part at dawn and the film was the sped up until the singers sound like birds. Coates is particularly interested in the exploration of the origins of human language and voice in birdsong, and many of

his other projects reflect our shared sincere desire to communicate and establish relationship with the more-than-human.

The collaborator series *braid* came directly from time spent at the residency in Ireland. The research I was doing concerned relationships to the environment, and the objects and elements found therein. The folklore and traditions enmeshed in Irish culture revealed a profound respect for nature. The animation and personification of geological formations and natural phenomena served as a way of explaining and relating to the natural world as kin. I started imagining what acts of tenderness could I perform that might make kin.

There are several theoretical approaches to making and maintaining kin. In *Staying with the Trouble,* Donna Haraway argues for tapping into the tentacular[18] powers and forces that are within reach, and making kin, not just amongst humans but also with all earthly inhabitants, in order for some of us to have chance of surviving.

> Maybe, but only maybe, and only with intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people will be possible.[19]

She articulates several important questions relating to the implications of kinship, including "to whom are we responsible?"[20] and "what must be cut and what must be tied if multi-species flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?"[21]. She looks to several prominent thinkers, including philosopher Vinciane Despret, to provide models for our behaviour. Despret is

[18] Tentacular, from the Latin *tentaculum* or *tentare* which means to feel, to try. Haraway uses this term to describe a type of being, and of thinking that is interconnected and responsive, like mycelium, but also like networks.
[19] Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble : Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. (101)
[20] Ibid. (24)
[21] Ibid. (24)

committed to approaching her interactions with politeness. She is open to "the possibility that surprises are in store, that something interesting is about to happen, but only if one cultivates the virtue of letting those that one visits intra-actively shape what occurs "[22]Like Braidotti, Despret is interested in stepping outside the construction of hierarchies in order to reveal more subtle behaviours. She approaches her research by asking what is it that matters to the subject of her observation. Snap judgments and hierarchical organizing are expedient. Perfectly in line with capitalism, a hierarchical view keeps us blind to all but that which directly serves or subordinates us, an unsustainable binary with no room to contemplate how we can interrelate, or the subtle, mutual benefits of that kind of knowing.

While I was contemplating what both Haraway and Despret were positing, and considering practical ways that I could apply their strategies for developing kinship, I was also hiking in the hills that rose up behind the residency studio. The *braid* series began when I came across a section of land that had been logged and then abandoned. It was filled with stumps, and in between were gorse bushes and long golden grass. The devastation of the landscape evoked strong feelings of despondence and a desire to engage kindly. The act of braiding is often one of tenderness when practiced between humans and while braiding occurs as a pattern in the natural world, rivers and blood circulation being prime examples, I was focusing on braiding as a human act, one that crosses cultures. The resulting french braid wove in and out of the debris.

[22] Ibid. (127)

Fig. 16. *braid I* / video still / 2017 /

Other braids followed, and ultimately led to the video *braid no. 8: Surrey/White Rock border* (fig. 17), which was a part of the thesis exhibition. It began with a pair of hands coming into view in the centre of the frame and dividing long grass into three sections. The hands started to french braid the grass, went into slow motion, emphasizing the movements of the hands and grass, returned to normal speed at the end before it looped. There was no sound and the video was recorded from the braider's point of view. During the exhibition, the video was displayed on a 42" monitor housed in an angular, free-standing wall. A beeswax-coated piece of glass sat in front of the monitor, with the wax scraped away in places, revealing some areas of the image more clearly.

I chose the slow movement of the video and the cloudy surface to articulate the dream-like quality of the encounter.

Fig. 17. *braid no. 8: Surrey/White Rock border* / video, cedar, glass, beeswax / Dimensions variable / 2018 / photo: Jennifer Brant

Several questions have arisen as a result of this project. What happens when we try to extend human acts of tenderness to the more-than-human? Are they translatable or even welcome? Can intention be communicated energetically? Can permission? As I made my interventions, I had very clear sensations in every place I considered braiding.

There were several places I did not braid because I felt uncomfortable. I chose to interpret this as the agency of the grass, informing me my actions were not welcome. Perhaps braiding might be seen as a way of interfering with the landscape, of cultivating and domesticating, which serves to complicate complicates the artwork.

As part of the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project, artist and curator Tania Willard chose to bring together several materials with intention of nurturing the environment. Willard, who is from Secwépemc Nation in the interior of British Columbia, has articulated the multi-layered relationships, histories and uses that occur in Stanley Park, the unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səl̓ílwətaʔɬ /Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations through her piece *Entwined*. Using materials from the park such as cedar, hemlock and alder combined with wool silver, she constucted a 15-foot long braid.

The multi-strand intervention told an interwoven story; madder root used to dye the wool red was also used to dye the red coats of the British soldiers, the wool itself spoke to the shared knowledge between peoples, and the oyster shell buttons referred to the large midden at Lumberman's Arch, one that demonstrates the long history of First Nations use. Willard summarizes her intentions beautifully in her artist's statement:

> In *Entwined*, I am attempting to bring it all together: ocean, forest, indigenous plant and animal life, the recognition of indigenous lands, knowledge and place, and a sense of wonder and meditation on our place within that, our place in the story ecology.[23]

There is an overlap of material sensibilities and physical process in our work, as well as in the way we respectfully approach the spaces in which we are working. Despite this, I acknowledge that the implications of our work are different; Willard, as an Indigenous

[23] http://vancouver.ca/parks-recreation-culture/stanley-park-environmental-art-project.aspx

woman, is able to speak to aspects of working with relations that I, as a woman of mixed ancestry with no inherited stories, cannot. The read on my work will, rightfully, be different; I lay no claim to Indigenous teachings. I attempt to articulate my relationship to the more-than-human from a place that straddles, and honours, different cultures and ontologies.

I am committed to being present in a way that leaves space for the emergence of something new, something unanticipated. I approach my encounters with tenderness, which, while more one-sided than intimacy, has the potential to become intimacy. By creating objects that serve as both agents and/or archives, I try to concurrently experience, facilitate and chronicle my interactions in material form. What are the tools I need to detect intimacy between the more-than-human and myself? Is intention enough? Can failure be generative? In what ways can it highlight our anthropocentricity? Make us vulnerable? Open us up to the possibility of connection and contamination? These questions arise in relation to most of my work but in slightly different ways from project to project. In *erratic rock stories: listening*, my tool is a listening device, constructed to interface with a specific boulder. What I or anybody else will hear is unpredictable and herein lays the magic; if we can be open to what might emerge, then something inevitably will. In *bird conversation: wren* there is a good chance that my version of birdsong will fail to resonate with the birds that hear it. The possibility that I will not be understood accentuates the fallibility of language, all language, and highlights vulnerability of communication.

Another way of understanding what happens when we meet another could come in the form of contamination. A word commonly associated with the spread of pathogens and environmental disaster, contamination can be enlivened and repurposed in order to articulate how we affect one another. While alive, we borrow elements and atoms from the universe and share the air we breathe, examples of fundamental, biological ways we interact. Anthropology professor Anna Lowenhaupt-Tsing writes at length about the

importance of moving away from the idea that we are self-contained, independent individuals, untouched by others. While collaboration sees us working together, contamination leaves us affected by our encounters, changed in unanticipated ways. Through investigating the commodity chain of the Matsutake mushroom, Tsing reveals a cast of characters from fungal to human that collaborate, and contaminate, in capitalist ruins.

> When I sprain my ankle, a stout stick may help me walk, and I enlist its assistance. I am now an encounter in motion, a woman-and-stick. It is hard for me to think of any challenge I might face without soliciting the assistance of others, human and not human[24].

This simple collaboration with the more-than-human demonstrates the extent to which we cannot move through this world alone. It also offers an opportunity to reframe the way we look at those objects and beings with which we have daily encounters. Within the context of my MFA work, contamination in ongoing; each time I visit an erratic, for example, I become woman-and-listening-device-and boulder, open to whatever that encounter will bring. Tsing's work proposes that there are no simple answers to the precarious situation we are in, as we continue to subscribe to systems of thought and capital accumulation that are destroying the earth, but it is the very messiness of making together, of encounters and contamination, that point to the chance for survival.

As a final thought regarding how we might change our relationship to the natural world, botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer suggests the word "ki" as a substitute for "it", with "kin" as the plural.

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[24] Tsing, Anna L. *The Mushroom at the End of the World : On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.* (29)

> Make no mistake: "ki" and "kin" are revolutionary pronouns. Words have power to shape our thoughts and our actions. On behalf of the living world, let us learn the grammar of animacy. Let us speak of the beings of Earth as the "kin" they are[25].

This expanded definition of kin is an important example of how language can be a tool to transform culture and holds potential for shifting our capacity to collaborate. To what extent does an artistic practice have responsibility in shaping culture? And in what ways is a materially or object-based practice uniquely suited to expanding our definitions of kin?

Many of the questions that have come out my research reflect a sensibility that is concerned with our relationship to nature, believes in ethics, is socially oriented and seeks a kind of in-betweeness. The transformation of mythologies, language and definitions requires a sincerity and commitment that can only be realized in a culture that is interested in countering disengagement and cynicism with open, collaborative and real engagement. Poly-ontology, with its expansive definition of what constitutes reality, or realities, and recognition of the capabilities of non-human entities to act could be essential to collaborating and, in fact, to surviving, what is coming toward us from the future.

[25] http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/together-with-earth/alternative-grammar-a-new-language-of-kinship

REFLECT

The Universe is made of stories, not of atoms.

from *the Speed of Darkness* by Muriel Rukeyser

The past two years have facilitated my engagement with my practice in ways I had not imagined, through deepening my theoretical and material relationships as well as forcing me to find ways of clearly articulating the nature of my work. What began as furtive explorations into marginalized spaces overlapping with complicated emotional states has evolved into a poignant practice of making kin with the more-than-human world. That reconnection with a sacred and potent liminal space first experienced in childhood, now steeped with social, political and environmental concerns and directed by a deep well of compassion, has given rise to a new way of finding relevance in my practice. I see my work as a bridging practice, interrupting the viewer's expectations, sometimes with delight and wonder, other times with a more somber? tone in order to find ways to probe the status quo. Providing opportunities for the audience to ponder, to engage with an object that serves as an archive of an interaction between the more-than-human world and myself or to participate in the ceremonial fieldwork that lies at the heart of the work I did during this MFA served to ask questions about how we relate to an expanded understanding of kin, whatever form they may take. Within a gallery setting, the archival or "nature museum" quality has the potential to reach people who do not generally contemplate these relationships. The fieldwork could be considered a chance to show up and invite the unexpected. It is an opportunity to develop a relationship with a place or someone in the more-than-human-world that is different than the ways in which we commonly assign significance. So often our thoughts about the more-than-human-world our tied to our inter-human activities; our genus loci or sense of place is tied to memories of, or experiences with, other humans . When we are presented with a situation outside of that framework, where we are being asked to consider the being that is in front of as a person separate from any preconceived

notions we might have. In part, the work attempts to facilitate the creation of a momentary human, more-than-human and an object/interface hybrid where each comes away changed, even ever so slightly, by the encounter.

The vast majority of questions and feedback I have received during this final stage of the MFA have been rich and generous. Having the opportunity to witness what lines of inquiry were prompted by my thesis work, and then be able to speak to them, was a gift. The process revealed the areas where my work can be pushed, where it is inconsistent, where it accomplishes what I set out to do and the places where it intersects with other artists, both historical and contemporary. It became clear that I take my facility with materials for granted and the call for me to both better describe my material choices and be more explicit about how I make objects have instigated a more stringent examination of my embodied knowledge. The defense was a generative, thoughtful, deeply affecting experience and the calibre of questions and the generosity of my committee were humbling. I feel excited about taking the work forward and to continue speaking and writing. The questions about deep time and parallels between an animist worldview and the discoveries of quantum physics, where matter is movement rather than a thing, have expanded my research and are propelling me towards what comes next.

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