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Volume 64, Number 2, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109718ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica64220221052>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (print)

2292-3586 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Bider, E. (2022). Poetry as Method: Engaging the “Weediness” of the Manitoba Maple through Poetic Encounter. *Anthropologica*, 64(2), 1–9.  
<https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica64220221052>

Article abstract

In the summer of 2021 as part of my PhD fieldwork, I volunteered with a “Neighbourwoods” project in Ottawa, Ontario, to inventory and assess the health of our neighbourhood’s tree canopy. The project offered me the opportunity to get a sense of residents’ relationships to trees near or on their property and think through the methodological challenge of doing ethnography with trees as well as people. With this poem, I try to extend empathy to the Manitoba Maple, a tree often considered “weedy,” “unruly,” or even “crap.” I try to use the poetic form as an act of interrelation that attempts to push against the ontological delineation between person and tree.

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# Poetry as Method

## Engaging the “Weediness” of the Manitoba Maple through Poetic Encounter

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**Abstract:** In the summer of 2021 as part of my PhD fieldwork, I volunteered with a “Neighbourwoods” project in Ottawa, Ontario, to inventory and assess the health of our neighbourhood’s tree canopy. The project offered me the opportunity to get a sense of residents’ relationships to trees near or on their property and think through the methodological challenge of doing ethnography with trees as well as people. With this poem, I try to extend empathy to the Manitoba Maple, a tree often considered “weedy,” “unruly,” or even “crap.” I try to use the poetic form as an act of interrelation that attempts to push against the ontological delineation between person and tree.

**Keywords:** Manitoba Maple; non-human relations; tree imaginaries; ethnographic poetry; urban anthropology; urban ecology

**Résumé:** Dans le cadre de mes recherches doctorales de terrain, durant l’été 2021, j’ai été bénévole pour le projet « Neighbourwoods » à Ottawa, en Ontario, afin d’inventorier et d’évaluer la santé du couvert forestier de notre quartier. Ce projet m’a permis de me faire une idée des relations qu’entretiennent les résidents avec les arbres situés à proximité ou sur leur propriété, et de réfléchir au défi méthodologique que représente l’ethnographie avec les arbres et les personnes. Avec ce poème, j’essaie de faire preuve d’empathie envers l’érable du Manitoba, un arbre souvent considéré comme une « mauvaise herbe », « indiscipliné », voire « merdique ». J’essaie d’utiliser la forme poétique comme un acte d’interrelation qui tente de s’opposer à la délimitation ontologique entre la personne et l’arbre.

**Mots-clés :** érable du Manitoba ; relations non-humaines ; imaginaires des arbres ; poésie ethnographique ; anthropologie urbaine ; écologie urbaine

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## Weed Tree

I'm backyard envious again,  
looking for green spaces  
while you shift in easy arcs  
connecting wires,  
camouflaging fences.

You, who briefly shadow the grey  
Back lot of my apartment, canopy  
Uncontained by property lines,

Shoots become taproot, heartwood,  
Mutating around an errant hose,  
Growing weed-quick around  
Snack wrappers, cigarette butts,

My eyes slip by the gaps amid buildings,  
Meet you crick-necked in the shade,  
Confident of eventual sunlight,

You fit in spaces small and unresolved,  
Like the sash of our window,  
Where I pile dirt and water up

To meet you ruining our rented floors,  
A weedling's poise in chancing brick  
And beam and tar to reach the dirt.

On a humid August afternoon in 2021, two volunteers and I met up to do a few hours of tree inventorying on a block of Flora Street in Centretown, Ottawa. This was the first year that such inventorying was taking place in the neighbourhood, under the “Neighbourwoods” model, designed by two forestry professors at the University of Toronto. Under this model, volunteers identified trees, assessed their health with the help of some initial training, measured their trunk diameter and noted any obstructions for the roots, canopy or branches. I was here as part of my PhD fieldwork, to get a sense of residents' relationships to trees near or on their property, and to work beside volunteers eager to form their own understandings and meanings around trees in the neighbourhood.



Figure 1. Manitoba Maples in Ottawa, Ontario, Photo by Author

The volunteers I was working with on this particular night were both new to tree identification. However, as we made our way onto residents' front lawns and into backyards, they both became adept at determining which trees were Manitoba Maples. We would find them mostly in backyards or underneath power lines, where they would require a service request to Hydro Ottawa to be trimmed or removed. Some of the Manitoba Maples we found were enormous—between 60 to 80 cm in diameter. But in Ottawa's Urban Forest Management Plan (2018), Manitoba Maples were described as invasive and in need of management in relation to city-owned woodlots, so it was not clear whether large-diameter Manitoba Maples would be considered worthy of protected status under Ottawa's Tree Protection By-law, which states that any

urban tree with a trunk over 30 cm in diameter cannot be cut or damaged without a City tree permit (City of Ottawa n.d.). Overall, Manitoba Maples were by far the most common species of tree we found throughout the block, and they were the trees people were most inclined to talk about.

On that particular day we were in a backyard measuring the trunk size of white spruce and chatting with the property owner who was very enthusiastic about our work. Her yard abutted that of her neighbours, and it was possible to see their backyard as well. Her neighbour came out and, upon hearing what we were doing, began to tell us about a tree that was “not a real tree,” that kept sneaking into his yard.

This tree grew far more quickly than others. It appeared to sprout saplings almost horizontally (that is, next to itself and possibly from the same lead root). He said the roots were hollow and it had spongy bark. “It’s like a weed tree,” he said, and the neighbours continued discussing how tricky it was to remove it once it had taken root. It was clear not only that this “weed tree” was not wanted, but that further, it was not even categorized as having suitable tree behaviour, to be accepted as part of someone’s backyard space. Furthermore, it appeared to be coming from someone else’s backyard, or fell right along the fence line, and so its ownership and therefore the person who was responsible for it, were uncertain. This tree, we determined with a quick glance through the yard, was a Manitoba Maple.

This moment describes what I now call, borrowing in part from Anderson (2016), a tree imaginary, and is the main focus of my doctoral research. I define tree imaginaries as speculative place-making acts that identify and seek to control select imaginable futures of/for trees and people in Ottawa in the context of climate change. Though in most cases, when discussing trees with residents or property owners, people held strong emotional attachments to their trees and indeed saw them as valuable carbon sinks, shade bearers or aesthetic objects, certain trees were distinctly beyond this categorization and seen as out of place. Norway Maples, Japanese Lilacs and Manitoba Maples were the main recipients of resident distaste and even distrust.

As I worked on evenings and weekends with other volunteers to create a picture of the neighbourhood’s tree life, I became fascinated by where trees can be found and marvelled at how much life refuses to follow arbitrary boundaries like property lines. Tree relationality to houses, powerlines, compacted earth and hazy air seemed so practiced compared to our pandemic struggles to find

ways of knowing and being with each other. I found that talking with people about trees also opened up new relational possibilities. Everyone had a tree story and wanted to share, after a stressful and exhausting fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if those stories were about an almost horizontal, enormous Manitoba Maple disrupting plans for a backyard garden, people wanted to share those plans, their affection for trees, and their imagined futures of the trees they spent time with.

Centretown is a densely populated neighbourhood, with a mix of single-family homes, homes converted to accommodate multiple renters, and apartment buildings. Backyards and front yards are often small and prioritize car parking. Given that asphalt and concrete dominate Centretown's streetscapes, it was remarkable to see just how many trees were alive and healthy even on my street alone. Manitoba Maples, however, managed to grow even in seemingly uninhabitable areas. Though now they are rarely deliberately planted, the Manitoba Maple is ubiquitous in Centretown, often found at the edges of property lines or in the narrow cracks between close-together homes. Joanna Dean (2015) notes that they were considered “unruly trees” by arborists in Ottawa because they are difficult to control and because they require a great deal of water, sometimes even affecting sewers.

Yet the features that now make the Manitoba Maple a nuisance in the eyes of my neighbours—its ability to grow fast, flourish anywhere and its large canopy—were once considered virtues. As Joanna Dean (2015) describes, in the late nineteenth century Manitoba Maples were deliberately planted as street trees because of their ability to shade the streets. It was only when the street trees matured that problems arose; they got caught in overhead wires, their branches tended to fly off in heavy winds (especially relevant after a recent horrific “derecho” storm that came through eastern Ontario in May 2022) and eventually, they were banned from street planting by the city (Dean 2015). Presently, their planting is merely discouraged, but that has not stopped their proliferation.

I was inspired by the neighbour's comment that Manitoba Maples are “not real trees” to start thinking about it as a weed tree, and think about how it was creating its own future imaginary, where it continued to survive in disrupted landscapes of the neighbourhood and continued to successfully propagate. I wondered how I could speculatively participate in that imaginary, dictated by the tree itself. What makes a tree or a plant become a weed to begin with? Dean (2015) writes that their unruliness—their inability to be controlled by

people—is a key part of the Manitoba Maple’s construction as a weed, or even as an invasive tree. Yet I am also interested in how narratives of invasive species play into a problematic categorization and prioritization of what kinds of trees and plants are good, bad, natural or unnatural, weeds or productive members of the urban environment.

In particular, the tree’s relationship to the urban environment has led to its being perceived as a weed tree. In a 2015 newsletter, the Friends of the Central Experimental Farm described the Manitoba Maple as “a survivor that grows from cracks in cement in the urban landscape,” (Glendinning 2015, 2). Manitoba Maples are highly adaptable. A study on their propensity as an invasive species in Europe showed that are able to express different traits based on their environment, in contrast to native trees (Porté and Lamarque et al. 2011). Therefore, while native maples may not thrive as well in urban environments either because of air pollution, poor soil conditions or lack of porous terrain around their roots, Manitoba Maples can adjust to these problems. As Larson (2015) writes, the distinction between native and non-native stems form a distinct binary between wilderness and places meant for people, even when the so-called invasion of non-native trees is a result of human actions. When the Manitoba Maple thrives in our urban environments, uncontrolled and out of place in a human landscape, its very inclusion in the categories of nature and native comes into question.

My ethnographic poem speaks to ongoing methodological debates about how best to engage with the non-human in anthropological work, how different relationships to the non-human get constituted and how the pandemic has made us more attuned to the non-humans in our midst, be they microbial, animal or vegetal (Kirksey 2020). The goal in writing the poem was not only to play with relational writing, but to extend empathy with beings so often scorned as weeds, unruly, or in one case during my fieldwork, “crap trees.” I hoped to capture what makes the Manitoba Maple weedy, while trying to find different meanings in this description through the poetic form.

As Heather Swanson (2017, 84) writes, multispecies anthropology “requires methods of observation that stretch the boundaries of what we typically call ethnography”; poetry is my avenue for stretching those boundaries. I find ecological poetry to be a particularly productive medium that at its finest, pushes the boundaries of human consciousness, as the author tries to grasp at the perspective and meanings of nature.

Jen Rose Smith (2021, 166) argues that poetry can “valorize the enunciation of detail, situatedness, and emplacedness”. As a researcher doing her work at home and sharing the same biome as the trees and people I work with, I see poetry as a way to explore the emplacedness of myself as a settler to Canada—living on land I was not invited to<sup>1</sup>—and trees in the area as beings whose predecessors have existed here for centuries. Furthermore, a deep attendance to language, placing different words together or even inventing new words moves away from writing as inherently representational, to writing as an act of interrelation and as an attempt to meet the ontological limit of being human and touching on what it means to be a Manitoba Maple (Thrift 2008; Kusserow 2021; Fitzpatrick 2012). I do not pretend to have achieved this goal, but I am eager to continue exploring these possibilities through ethnographic poetry.

### **Artist’s Statement**

I write poetry and fiction because I love flexing my imaginative muscles. I play between speculative and science fiction, and see relationships—between people, animals, plants and ideas—as the core focus of my work. Increasingly, I have become interested in ecological poetry and have been inspired to think about poetry as an attempt to catch existence in the act; as a tool to open myself up to a deeper awareness that grasps the soil underneath me, the birds above and all the little moments of life as it happens around me, if only for a brief moment.

My poetry has been published in 3 Moon Magazine and Northern Otter Press. My first collection of short stories, *We Animals*, was published in December 2020.

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### **Note**

- 1 The land on which Ottawa sits is Algonquin Anishinaabe territory. European settlers came to the Ottawa River Watershed region primarily for the abundance of pine forests, which they quickly depleted, and ignored Algonquin sovereignty and previously established treaty relations in the area (Lawrence 2012).



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