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Moving with Whatcom Falls Park: A Score for Unsettling in Place

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Article abstract

In July 2020, I relocated from the territory of the Lenape in New York City, New York, to the ancestral homelands of the Coast Salish Peoples and the Lummi Nation and Nooksack Tribe, otherwise known as Bellingham, Washington. As a settler Canadian and "dependent" on my partner's US work visa, I wrestle with my precarious yet privileged footing here in the southern part of Turtle Island. As well, friends and family often ask me how I am "settling in." I deploy this very question as a provocation to ask, As a white settler, what does it mean to both responsibly unsettle oneself and "settle in" to a new home on stolen land? At the same time, due to the complexities of moving across the country during COVID-19, I feel unmoored and disconnected from my immediate surroundings. I am the most grounded when I am dancing. Working through the metatarsals of my feet, those bones that absorb shock and engender soft landings, is both a metaphor and a methodology for my practice-based research as a settler artist-scholar. Thus, through a piece that is part photo essay and part embodied reflection, I move with the land here on the west coast. With Whatcom Falls Park as my studio and soundscape, I will work through these questions and acknowledge the Coast Salish Peoples, the Lummi Nation, and the Nooksack Tribe, on whose land I currently move.

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ARTICLES

Moving with Whatcom Falls Park: A Score for *Unsettling in Place*

Elan Marchinko

White Butte Trails, Saskatchewan, Treaty 4 territory, 2020: Side-by-side, in a horizontal line, six performers move at a glacial pace. Bound together by one rope, these Indigenous, settler, and arrivant artists are viscerally exploring what it means to be enfolded, implicated within Canadian colonial violence. Elsewhere, someone drags their toes through sand, rocks, and twigs. A body rolls through dry grass and leaves. The names of loved ones are sounded into the air. Iron oxide is deployed to draw an endless, red boundary through the grass. This is *Trespassers Waltz* by the Curtain Razors, a series of co-occurring, multidisciplinary installations and interventions by fifty-two artist collaborators who are investigating themes of trespassing and isolation.¹ Put differently, these artists are injecting into space fifty-two nascent gestures of care and settler responsibility. As per COVID-19 physical distancing protocols, spectators are invited to wander the land. They are guided by the twists and turns of the trees such that they embody its mystery, and each vignette wields an element of surprise (National Arts Centre 2020).²

What does it mean to be held up by land on which one is always already a trespasser? In July 2020, amidst COVID-19, I relocated from the territory of the Lenape in New York City, New York, to the ancestral homelands of the Lhaq'temish or Lummi Nation (People of the Sea) and Nooksack Tribe (“always bracken fern roots”) colonially known as Bellingham, in Whatcom County, Washington, USA. Due to the complexities of the pandemic, including the closure of the border, I haven’t been able to return home to Canada. Moreover, friends and family often ask me how I am “settling in.” For a white settler-Canadian who is currently a “resident alien” living in the United States, what does it mean to responsibly unsettle oneself while inevitably “settling in” to a new home on stolen land?

A fourth-generation settler of Ukrainian and mixed British Isles heritage, I have and continue to be held up by these lands and the many nations and people who continue to care for them and to whom I am grateful. I am also thankful for strong internet and communication technology that enables me to visit with loved ones, work with my graduate student cohort, and maintain my dance practice with my teachers on the East Coast. Indeed, platforms such as Skype, Zoom, and Instagram offer portals through which we nourish virtual ecologies of care and kinship. However, I feel disconnected from my new environment here in the Pacific Northwest. Not only are my colleagues in future time (Eastern Standard Time is three hours ahead), but due to glitches and lapses in bandwidth, time moves erratically, freezing then jumping ahead, spilling across what seems like an ever-unfolding present.

For many, distancing and sheltering-in-place protocols have shifted our connections away from the physical spaces we inhabit and onto the flat screenlands of Zoom. Even though the planet is at our fingertips, we are out of step and out of time with each other and with the outside world. The Curtain Razors spotlight multiple ways in which to reroute this temporal discombobulation such that those who are beneficiaries of neocolonialism and who live in relative comfort in these

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unprecedented times embody different rhythms outside of linear, colonial time. Their movement with the uneven terrain invokes how, for non-conformist bodies³ within white ableist supremacy, “even the smoothest ground is not flat.”⁴ In other words, the Curtain Razors recruit the limitations of the pandemic to actualize possibilities for settler reckonings with “what lives on” from colonial violence (Dean 2015, 3).⁵

Stumbling toward Decolonization

What follows is my attempt to work through these questions and explore what it might mean to *refuse* to settle into my new home. And so, with Bellingham’s Whatcom Falls Park as my performance space, I present a score for *unsettling in* to the Pacific Northwest. Along with the Curtain Razors, I also move with the work of settler scholars such as Paulette Regan, who proposes “unsettling the settler within” as a critical self-reflexivity required to learn from the experiences of residential school survivors and confront our own internalized colonialism (2010), and Denise M. Nadeau who deploys the term “unsettled spirit” to describe her constant practice of reexamining how she makes sense of her relationships with the world and with the earth (2020, 255).

Whatcom Falls Park is an ideal site to stage a score for unsettling in because, like most human-built environments, it is a microcosm of terra nullius practices where capitalist heteropatriarchy cut its teeth into so-called undomesticated wilderness to rehearse mastery over the natural world, superimposing onto it a mythology of discovery while setting its waters on fire. I am referring here to the 1999 explosion of the Olympic Pipe Line Company’s liquid fuel pipeline. It is estimated that 277,000 gallons of gasoline infused Whatcom Creek, setting it on fire, killing three people, and doing catastrophic damage to the vegetation and wildlife. Recently, this scenario was repeated on a larger scale when images circulated of ocean fires in the Gulf of Mexico when one of the Pemex oil firm’s underwater pipelines burst.⁶ Also, many of the articles about Whatcom Falls by travel journalists and bloggers that pop up via a quick Google search punctuate their rich descriptions of the park’s beauty and amenities with the same origin story that begins in the early 1900s and obfuscates the site’s longer history (Lasbo 2017; Gillard n.d.).⁷ Brenda MacDougall, who is a Métis geography scholar, tracks the evolution of historical scholarship vis-à-vis Indigenous knowledge systems of space and place and how these cosmologies might inform historiography as well as geography. MacDougall points out that as a colonial discourse, historical research is predicated on human-centred “relationships to time (continuity or change), but spatial considerations are rarely anything more than setting” wherein this obsession with settlement-focused analysis forecloses “a treatment of the land as a central character worthy of analysis. That is, *when* something happened normally trumps *where* it happened” (2017, 65, emphasis mine). With MacDougall’s thesis in mind, this score is envisioned partly as an alternative travel guide through the park that attempts to press against its insular history as a built place and attend to its longer story as a space.

This score is also a response to theatre scholar Bethany Hughes’s proposal that, as a means to move in a good way, settlers engage in a mindful practice of *greeting* (2019, E-23, emphasis in original).⁸ Riffing on Marvin Carlson’s theory of ghosting,⁹ Hughes, who is a registered member of the Choctaw Nation, describes greeting as “an active and intentional practice of presence” with the intent to honour and support the Indigenous people and spaces that always already inform our everyday lives (E-23). As such, greeting works in opposition to discovering, “which reduces the discovered to a kind of possession, and customer-ing, which commodifies and dehumanizes” and “is focused not on attaining or accreting, but on relationships, humility, and reciprocal nurturance” (E-23). For Hughes, greeting proceeds through five important elements: impermanence, dependence,

relationship, precedence, and reciprocity (E-24). And so, I incorporate each element into my score as a prompt to further examine the stakes of *unsettling in* to life in the Pacific Northwest. Importantly, Hughes reminds us that “in an Indigenous worldview, hosts include the land, water, nonhuman animals, and more-than-human presences” (E-24). Due to ongoing physical distancing restrictions in greater Whatcom County, my score is limited to the non- and more-than-human hosts surrounding the falls. I will need further pause to think through my responsibility toward the Lummi and Nooksack peoples on whose ancestral territories I now move. I would also like to note that, as an imperfect strategy to offset my white settler body from the centre of analysis, I have chosen to include only my photographs of the land and water instead of a film of myself moving through the space.

The Score

1. Impermanence: “Guesting is by nature impermanent,” writes Hughes. “Guests are not resident owners. They come to a place already occupied, already owned. They come to a specific place, a place that existed prior to their arrival and prior to their needs as guests” (Hughes 2019, E-24). Escaping the roar of traffic on Lakeway Drive, the main road intersecting with the south entrance to the park, I begin my ascent up the gravel path to Whatcom Falls Park. I begin to tune my ear to the sound of the wind in the trees and the crunch of gravel under my feet as I walk in a moderate but steady rhythm. I think about the rocks that have occupied the earth for billions of years. They precede me and will proceed after me. I am impermanent, a mere snapshot in their time.

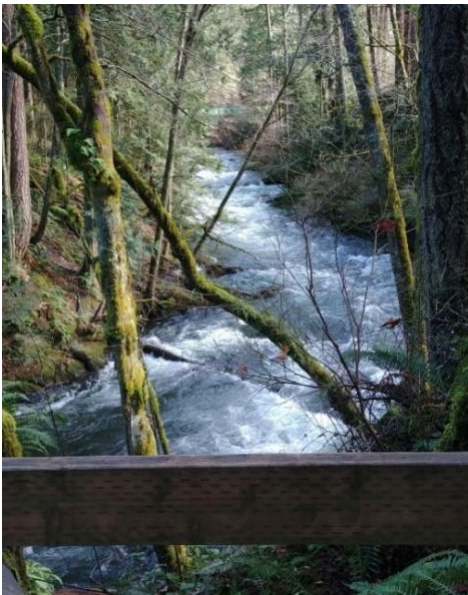


The path into Whatcom Falls Park, February 17, 2021. Photo: Elan Marchinko.



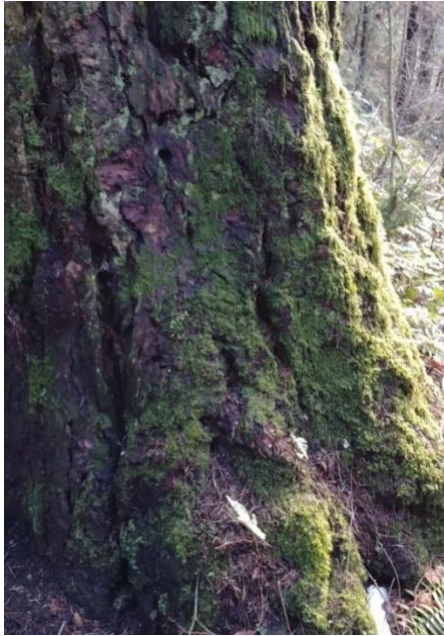
Close-up of the constellation of rocks, stones, and pine needles on the path into Whatcom Falls Park, February 17, 2021. Photo: Elan Marchinko.

2. Dependence: “Guesting reminds us that we are under the authority of our hosts. We are not preeminent. We are dependent. One can only be dependent upon someone/something” (Hughes 2019, E-24.). I take an even closer look at the constellation of rocks embedded in the ground. I am reminded that I am never completely standing my ground. Rather, the ground, as my host, is holding me up. And although I need the ground for support in these unprecedented, lonely times, the earth, the gravel, and the rocks do not need me. Although I stand on top of them, I am under their authority.



Whatcom Creek, Whatcom Falls Park, February 17, 2021. Photo: Elan Marchinko.

3. Relationship: “Dependency requires relationship. One is always the guest of someone, of someone who is real and alive” (Hughes 2019, E-24). I pass by a large oak tree. Its trunk is climbing with lichen. What does it mean to be the guest of slow-growing lichen? To dance with a tree in a pas de deux-like exchange of carbon and oxygen? Thinking through relational movement, Erin Manning writes, “Movement is one with the world, not body/world, but body-worlding. We move not to populate space, not to extend it or to embody it, but to create it” (2009, 13). What does it mean to body-world with an oak tree? How do I ask a tree for consent to world together and blur the boundary between human and nonhuman, where this dissolution is a practice that takes time, and that doesn’t occur perfectly in the first instance, if ever?



Lichen climbs an oak tree, Whatcom Falls Park, February 17, 2021. Photo: Elan Marchinko.

4. Precedence: “The inherent relationship within guesting precedes the acts of guesting and hosting. Not only do hosts exist prior to a guest’s arrival, but the relationship enabling the guest to arrive preexists their arrival too” (Hughes 2019, E-24). The first set of falls are in view. On the bridge, I feel the force of the falls, the mist on my face, and the vibrations of their rumbling and thrashing. How do the falls preexist me as their guest when their waters are never the same?



The falls, Whatcom Falls Park, February 17, 2021. Photo: Elan Marchinko.

5. Reciprocity: “Guesting well demands healthy relationships that invite respect, reciprocity, generosity, listening, conflict resolution, boundaries, and joy. Guesting is practising reciprocity in the interest of generously supporting your host. It implies obligations for the guest. Guesting is a practice that encompasses and accounts for all those relationships. It is not simple nor formulaic. Bringing flowers and wine as a hostess gift will not be enough. Guesting requires thoughtful, intentional, holistic practices in thought, speech, and action” (Hughes 2019, E-24). Having descended the gravel path, I hop back onto the sidewalk. Outside of being a tidy visitor, how do I engage reciprocally with the falls and all that the space holds in a responsible, meaningful way?



Park exit to Lakeway Drive, Bellingham, February 17, 2021. Photo: Elan Marchinko.

Reflection

As I amble back down to Lakeway Drive, my molecular structure is forever altered by the mist of the falls, the deep memory of the rocks, and the slow growing lichen. The lull of the oak trees coalesces with the roar of the main road, softening the hard concrete. *Even the smoothest ground is not flat.* Circling back to the Curtain Razors and their *Trespassers Waltz*, artistic associate Terri Fidelak describes the piece as “uncomfortable. A big part of the process is just being okay with the discomfort” (National Arts Centre 2020, n.p.). And as Hughes reminds us, “Guesting well takes time” (2019, E-24). It’s okay to have more questions than answers as I stumble along this uneven path of settler responsibility. After all, stumbling is a suspension within movement without necessarily arriving. And so, I will continue . . . slowly . . . imperfectly . . . necessarily.



Sun peeking through cedar trees, Whatcom Falls Park, February 17, 2021. Photo: Elan Marchinko.

Acknowledgments

Much gratitude is owed the editors of this special issue (Jenn Cole and Melissa Poll) for their infinite patience and guidance in the writing of this piece. Thank you also to the anonymous reviewers for their rigorous feedback, and to my colleague, Signy Lynch, for pointing me toward *Trespassers Waltz*.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Curtain Razors artistic associate Johann Bundon for providing the exact number of participating artists. According to the National Arts Centre (2020, n.p.) event page for *Trespassers Waltz*, these include artist leads Kris Alvarez, Johann Bundon, Terri Fidelak, Jayden Pfeifer and Joey Tremblay; production management Andrew Manera, Zoe Barclay-Wright; participating artists Iftu Ahmed, Rania Al-Harhi, Skyler Anderson, Julianna Barclay, Sarah Bergbusch, Teddy Bison, Belle Brown-McEwen, Heather Cameron, Elizabeth Curry, Raphaële Frigon, Fran Gilboy, Benjamin Ironstand, Zoë James, Kendra Kembel, Jay Kimball, Night Kinistino, Pete Kytwayhat, Barbara Meneley, Aren Okemaysim, Orion Paradis, Karley Parovsky, Janelle Pewapsconias, Jessie Ray Short, Ben Schneider, Zenaya Semple, Krista Solheim, Judy Wensel, Misty Wensel, Isabella Wishlow, I-Ying Wu; collaborators Jeff Morton and Edith Skeard (Bell Dreams); Traci Foster, John Loeppky, Emil Schmuck, Natasha Urkow, Ammanda Zelinski (Listen to Dis); Olive Crozier, Ray Crozier, Iris James, Zoë James, Lazlo Wensel Paradis, and Lilla Fayant (Truly Unruly).
2. *Trespassers Waltz* examines the colonial relationship as exacerbated by trespass laws, which were amended in 2019 as the province's response to the murder of Colten Boushie, a young Cree man and member of Red Pheasant Cree Nation (Martin, 2020, n.p.). Colten Boushie was killed by gunshot on August 9, 2016, when he and four friends drove onto the property of white landowner Gerald Stanley because their vehicle had a flat tire. Stanley was acquitted of the crime.
3. I am referring to Hansen and Lanz's use of the term nonconformist bodies to describe the ways in which some bodies do not fit within the normative standards ascribed by ableist, capitalist supremacy (2009, 29). More recently, Hansen deploys nonconformist bodies to highlight the multiple ways in which people are physically, sensorily, or mentally in the world (2020, n.p.). This term is also helpful in thinking through how racialized bodies transgress and refuse to conform to standards underwritten by whiteness.

4. I am alluding to anti-Black violence and the murders in the United States by police of George Floyd in Minneapolis and Breonna Taylor in Louisville, among many others. Similar to Harvey Young's tracing of the Black body as a "second body, an abstracted and imagined figure" that "shadows or doubles the real one" (2010, 7), First Nations, Métis, and Inuit subjectivities are violently obfuscated by a limited number of tropes that deny their right to be viewed as human. Furthermore, in his analysis of performance artist William Pope.L's crawls, dance scholar André Lepecki describes them as "not only a profound critique of whiteness and blackness, of verticality and of horizontality, but also a general critique of ontology, a general critique of the kinetic dimension of our contemporaneity, and a general critique of abject processes of subjectivization and embodiment under the racist-colonialist machine—all by proposing a particular form of moving after the Fanonian stumble" (2006, 88).
5. Amber Dean questions what it means for a wider public to care about gendered racial violence regarding disappeared Indigenous women on Vancouver's Lower East Side (2015).
6. Diana Taylor deploys the term scenario to spotlight the persistent repetition of scenes of discovery over time. She writes, "scenarios exist as culturally specific imaginaries—sets of possibilities, ways of conceiving conflict, crisis, or resolution" where there are a limited number of possible, but adaptable, endings (2003, 13). Furthermore, scenarios "like performance, means never for the first time" (28).
7. In 1908, a group called the Young Men's Commercial Club colonized trails into the falls to transform it into a park. Then, in 1914, ownership of the park was transferred to the City of Bellingham, where a women's group called the Whatcom Falls Park Club added wooden bridges, picnic shelters, and helped design the landscaping and purchased land next to the park, connecting it to the downtown to make it more accessible to Bellingham residents. By the 1930s, the park was fully operated by the city (U.S. History, n.p.).
8. Hughes's article is a response to the proceedings of the 2018 ATHE conference in Boston, Massachusetts, "Theatres of Revolution: Performance, Pedagogy, and Protest." As part of the exploration of the conference theme, participants attended excursions to Plimoth Plantation, the nonprofit living history museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts, that focuses on Pilgrims and Wampanoag in the seventeenth century.
9. Hughes suggests that if ghosting is that which *returns* to a physical or metaphysical space, as Carlson proposes, then guesting is the intentional act of coming to that space (2019, E-24, emphasis mine).

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