

TEXTILES AND PLACE : PERSPECTIVES FROM THREE CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY ARTIST EDUCATORS¹

Emma Hoch and Kay Noele, graduate students
Kathleen Vaughan, professor
Concordia University

Abstract

This illustrated text gives a brief overview of the research-creation projects of three Concordia artists and art educators, who work with the medium of textiles to explore aspects of ‘place’ — explored via critical and creative interpretations of our lived experience, cultural histories and stories of locale. Emma Hoch (MA, Art Education) discusses her ongoing work *Windowed Reflections*, representing Montreal residents’ interactions with their views through different textile media. Kay Noele (MA student, Art Education) showcases small weavings created as an artist’s residency in Peru, using local materials. Kathleen Vaughan (Associate Professor, Art Education) discusses *Walk in the Water*, which brings together oral history and visual art in an exploration of the changing shoreline of Pointe-St-Charles, created in the Re-Imagine studio of her Concordia University Research Chair in Socially Engaged Art and Public Pedagogies, with assistance from Emma and Kay, among other team members.

Keywords: Textiles, place, stories, materiality, research-creation, oral histories, social and environmental justice.

Textiles and Place:

Perspectives from Three Concordia University Artist Educators

In our creative practices, we three artists and educators work with textiles to explore place. With feminist geographer Doreen Massey, we consider place to be “open ... as

¹ This research was supported in part by grants from Concordia University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kathleen Vaughan.

woven together out of ongoing stories, as a moment within power-geometries, as a particular constellation within the wider topographies of space, and as in process, as unfinished business“... (2005, p. 131). Sometimes developing pictorial images, sometimes creating artists’ maps, we connect with local residents, use local materials and listen to and represent local voices. Our goal is to showcase and embody particular aspects of a locality, of a moment’s lived reality in a spot, of perceptions, experiences and longings about a structure, a site or a neighbourhood.



Fig. 1. Montage of three details of the authors’ artworks.

Underpinning our work are varied questions that all in some way boil down to, How can research-creation help intervene into and help decolonize both positivist notions of knowledge of the world and extractive understandings of place? From such a standpoint, as artists working on issues of place at Concordia University, we would like to acknowledge that Concordia is located on unceded Indigenous lands. The Kanien’kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we gather today.

Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal is historically known as a gathering place for many First Nations. Today, it is home to a diverse population of Indigenous and other peoples. We respect the continued connections with the past, present and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other peoples within the Montreal community.² Although none of our artwork here directly addresses Indigenous/colonial histories, we each in our own way consider questions of accessibility, entitlement and social and environmental justice. In the following sequence of three artist's texts we each write of a recent individual project of place, describing our textile approach.

***Windowed Reflections* by Emma Hoch**



Fig. 2. Emma Hoch, *Windowed Reflections*, as installed at Atwater Library, December 2017. Photo: Kathleen Vaughan

² This territorial acknowledgement and resources were created by Concordia University's Indigenous Directions Leadership Group (2017). To read the entire territorial acknowledgement and learn more about why it was written this way, please visit: <https://www.concordia.ca/about/indigenous/territorial-acknowledgement.html>.

In fall of 2017, I began my Masters in Art Education at Concordia and I was in Kathleen Vaughan's Right to the City class, which is an "ongoing interdisciplinary pedagogical initiative at the Concordia University which invites students to learn in place and with place and the people and creatures who inhabit a neighbourhood" (Vaughan, High & Craven, 2017, p. 9). In this class, we were exploring and understanding the Shaughnessy Village neighbourhood of Montréal. As I had just moved to Montreal a few days before the fall semester from a small town of five thousand in rural New Brunswick, I felt unsure if I had a right to this city. The city felt overwhelming at times and I often felt as if I had been sensory overloaded. However, I had moments where I became truly mesmerized by the little things. In Jane Bennett's book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, she offers a comment that encompasses my new-found viewpoint. She states, "to be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday"

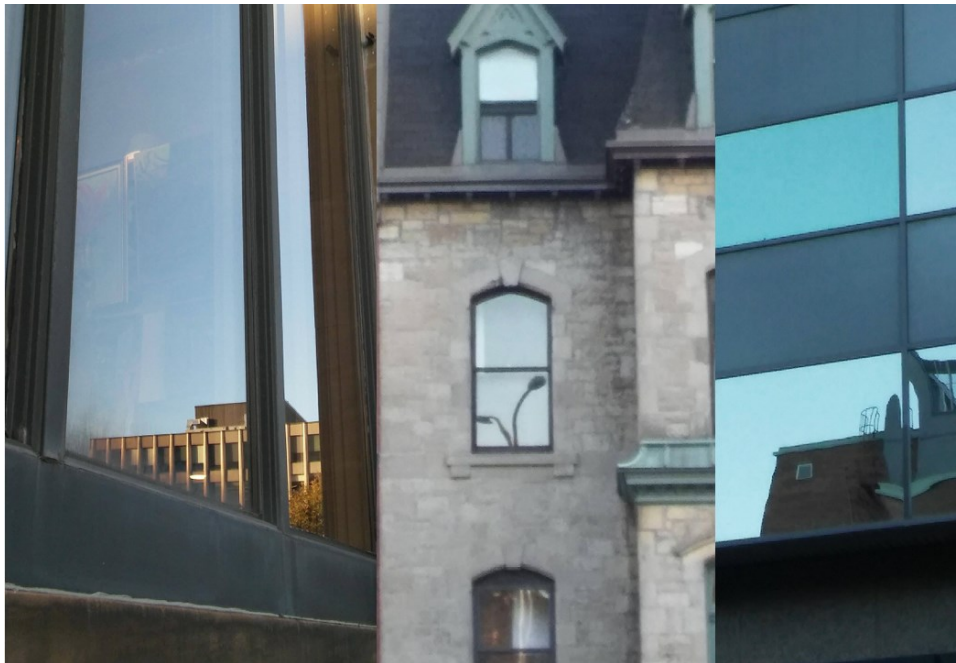


Fig. 3. Montage of Emma Hoch's photographs of urban reflections. Photos: Emma Hoch

(2011, p. 4). This furthered my desire to work with the fascination that everyday observations brought me.

For the Right to the City course, which required us to create an artwork about Shaughnessy Village, I found inspiration from my fascination with the little everyday moments that don't always get noticed. At that time, I was unfamiliar with every part of the city and I felt that to get to know the Shaughnessy Village, I needed to walk around and observe. As I was wandering, I often noticed how the tall windowed buildings included reflections of other buildings in them and different moments of the day. These reflections struck me as perfectly framed fragments of the Shaughnessy Village. Continuing to notice these reflections, I started to take photos of them. I wanted to capture many different angles which demonstrated the framing of one building, how it encapsulated another, and how they constantly changed. The continuous movement of these reflected moments became the focus of my artwork.

Working with the photos, I broke the colours and shapes down to five reflections and I found embroidery floss to match each one. I used both embroidery and cross stitch techniques on both sides of organza fabric to capture each moment and to bring texture and dimension back into these flattened reflections. I used semi-transparent organza fabric to mimic the shiny and see-through qualities of glass in a window. Once the embroidery was done, I stretched the fabric over an old window frame to bring back visual reference of the original installation.

At the end of the course, everyone displayed their artwork in Shaughnessy Village at Atwater Library. I was able to display my work in a corner archway opening in the mezzanine. This positioning allowed for the viewers to see both sides of the work. At certain angles, they would see the embroidery from behind with the threads hanging out of the front. This was to recreate the changing perspectives that one sees when looking at reflections, shifting as viewed from varied angles.



Fig. 4. Emma Hoch's *Windowed Reflections*, detail, as installed at Atwater Library. Photo: Emma Hoch

By working with cross stitch and embroidery, and with my process of abstracting shapes and colours from the photograph, I worked very closely with the images I took. As I did so with each of the five embroideries, I noticed that I became more aware of Shaughnessy Village by looking so closely at its details. Through close observation and through allowing myself to be struck by the everyday, as Jane Bennett noted, I began to understand my right to the city. The power and learning that I took away from paying close attention to the everyday and being fascinated with it, has furthered my own development as an artist and is something that I always encourage my students to explore within their own creating. What emerges from your everyday can be mesmerizing.

Strands of Thread and Memory in Peru by Kay Noele

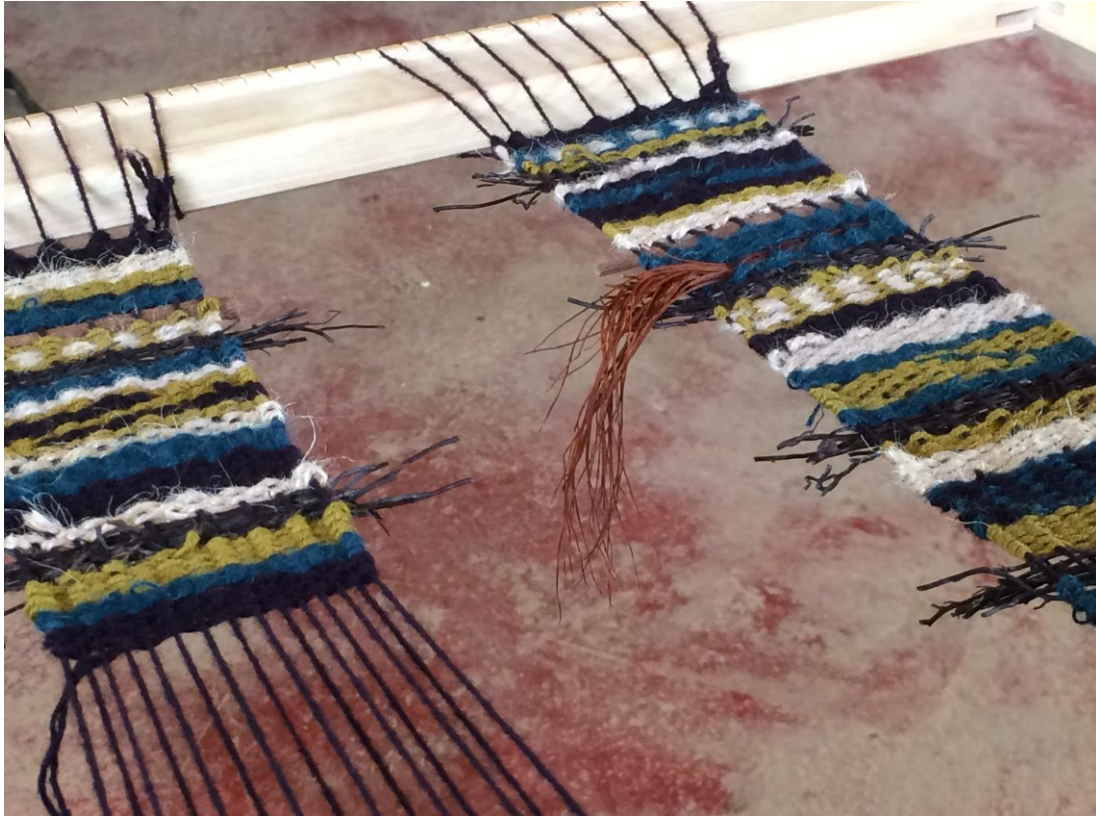


Fig. 5. Kay Noele, *Los Caminos* weavings in progress on the loom. Photo: Kay Noele

Through my practice as a community-based artist and educator, I have come to understand that how we make (art) affects how we make place. The materials that we source for our making defines how our society perceives value and/or resources in the landscapes around us and thereby affects how we tend to the places that we have made and continue to make. My interest in connecting with local fibres and colours, textiles and place, brought me to Peru for an independent study for my Masters program at Concordia in the fall of 2017. What follows are encounters with strands of thread and memories of a travelling artist from Canada and land-based textile traditions of Peru. **Mapping the getting-to-know of a place.** As I travelled through several districts and the three main ecological systems (desert, Andino mountains, jungle) of Peru, I used textiles and fibre both as a reference point as I came to know this new-to-me place. During *Tinkuy*, a week long textile gathering in Cusco, artists from 17 countries and 22 districts of Peru, told stories of the places they came from through sharing the textile techniques from their

region. I connected with artists from around the world across language barriers in this way. I saw how their places and textiles, as well as my own, were intertwined, based on the materials that were accessible to our regions, how motifs and techniques evolved along with traditions and culture over time, and how textile arts and crafts often facilitate the literal development of communities.

Then I settled into a mud hut on the hillside above the Río Cumbaza, in San Roque, Peru, I began to weave a map. In the past, I have used map-making to obscure imposed borderlines, opting for lived experience over atlas. I used maps to reclaim the geographies, including personal experiences within the latitude and longitude of space. My maps thought about place as Lucy Lippard does when she writes, “space defines landscape, where space combined with memory defines place” (1997, p. 9). They were inspired by critical and artful maps that came before. As map theorist Katherine Harmon suggests, “Traditional maps assert, ‘This is how the world is,’ and expects the reader to agree. Artists’ maps countermand that complicity, saying, ‘This is my vision and I encourage you to construct your own’” (2004, p. 11). But when I started these maps, I was just trying to understand where exactly I had landed before beginning to subvert borderline definitions of the place. These are maps that help me to orient myself within the storied-landscape of a place that is more than just a nation.

As I chose the materials for these maps, I was concerned with their vital materiality as artifact (Bennett, 2010). All of the wool used for the first two maps was obtained from Peruvian spinners during *Tinkuy*. As I unwound the skeins, the strands of yarn would coil back up on themselves. This happened because the yarn was still charged with the energy from spinning the fibres in the first place. Peruvian spinners put much more energy into their yarn than I do when I spin; this helps create a super fine and strong thread that can be easily pied and also affects the way the finished textiles will curl or not. As I worked, I was running my own fingers through yarn charged with memory and energy from the previous artist.



Fig. 6. Peru hillsides and mountains, as experienced by Kay Noele. Photo: Kay Noele

The warp of each map is alpaca fibre hand-spun by an artisan from the community of Pitumarca, Cusco district. Alpaca is fine and soft and would not usually be suitable as a warp for tapestries like these, but I wanted the the skeleton of the map to reference a deep connection to the history of this place. Alpaca are native to this geography; their fibre has been used in weavings in Peru since pre-Incan times (Callañaupa Alvarez, 2007).

The weft is made of sheep's wool. Sheep were introduced to Peru by the Spanish and have become the source of the most affordable and common natural fibre these days (Callañaupa Alvarez, 2007). By using wool, a non-Indigenous fibre, that was spun and naturally dyed by Indigenous hands, I acknowledge the history of this landscape as colonized, as sheep's fibre hides the native alpaca, but in the end still processed and spun by the skill and labour of Indigenous knowledge that has not disappeared but in fact continues to make up the social fabric of this nation.



Fig. 7. Kay Noele, *Los Caminos, 7, 8, 9* (2017): three of 12 small weavings. Photo: Kay Noele

This first map depicts the geographical features of Peru: desert, highlands, jungle, and waterways. The second map explores the borderlines of the districts of Peru as nation-state. Making this map helped me to understand the different places that the artists I met at *Tinkuy* were from. The third map in this series transcends natural and government definitions of this place. While recalling the form of the silhouette of the nation, the layers of this map are constructed from natural and synthetic fibres that I collected during my journey in this land. The weft combines natural fibres, with pieces of confetti and plastic rope that collected while wandering the streets of Barranco and Miraflores in Lima, twine from Arequipa, raw alpaca fibre gifted at *Tinkuy* in Cusco, bark and seed fluff found near

the Rio Cumbaza, and some cotton which I learned to spin with Alfonso, an Indigenous textile artist based in Lamas, San Martin. Synthetic found remnants of someone else's day in the city clash with carefully tended alpaca fibre and seed pods from the jungle. Here, I do not attribute judgements of what is authentic or environmental, these strands of memory and place come together to show the social fabric of a complex place.

Los Caminos. After having oriented myself with the first triptych of maps, I continued on with what became twelve tiny tapestries, walking maps which I call *Los Caminos*, "the Pathways". These long and narrow strips are woven from found objects, collected bits-and-pieces of the habitat I walked through and engaged with while staying at the Sachaqa Centro del Arte in San Roque de Cumbaza. Tree bark and cotton pods found on the edge of the Rio Cumbaza, tall grass and seed fluff pocketed while walking through the hills in the jungle, brought back to the studio in an attempt to understand this specific place. These maps draw attention to what can be found underfoot; they hope to enchant and animate driftwood and twigs, to invite others to look closer at their surroundings as well.

These tiny walking maps remind me that there are so many different ways of knowing the world, so many different ways to make place, and it is important to hold space for all of them. In these maps, I offer my personal encounters with this place and invite others to weave their own.

An Invitation to *Walk in the Water* | *Marcher sur les eaux* by Kathleen Vaughan

Walk in the Water is a research and creation project that uses visual art and oral history to explore the St. Lawrence River's inaccessible shoreline at the de-industrialized Montreal neighbourhood of Pointe-St-Charles, from environmental and social perspectives. The project draws on current and previous writings and oral history interviews with local residents as well as with experts from the disciplines of urban planning, history, political ecology, botany, literature, sanitary engineering, environmental studies, water ecologies, and more. This project was sparked



Fig. 8. The now-scrubby edge of the infilled shoreline bluff at Pointe-St-Charles, with the stairway to the water's edge blocked off and, to the right and out of frame, the reconstruction of the fast-moving highway 10 to/from downtown Montreal. Photo: Kathleen Vaughan

by my accidental encounter with an article in the Canadian urban issues magazine, *Spacing*. Author Alannah Heffez mapped six different moments of human intervention into the shoreline of the Point from 1801 to 1964, its abuse as a city dump, its infilling time and again with contaminated soil from multiple large-scale urban development initiatives, and its abandonment to the automobile (as a fast-moving highway) and industry (as a route for train tracks and maintenance yards) (2010). As a consequence of this history, Montrealers and especially those in the Point are disconnected from their River. As my interviewee Jean Desjardins put it, based on his observations of 35 years of running a recreational fishing business in the waters off Montreal, “Most of the people don’t know how good is the St-Lawrence River. Because most people who lives in Montreal don’t even see the water because there is no access to it anywhere, because of the Port” (personal communications, November 8, 2017). I, too, as a 10-year resident of Pointe-St-Charles felt and feel distanced from the nearby but inaccessible River, an added impetus to my work.

The purpose of *Walk in the Water* is to help enhance viewers' relationships with the St. Lawrence River, raising awareness of its specifics and complexities, of some of the many ways that people can and do connect with its waters and creatures, and encouraging affection and advocacy for this remarkable environmental and cultural feature of central/eastern Canada. Flowing more than 1200 kilometres from freshwater to salt, from its origins at Lake Ontario to the largest estuary in the world at the Gulf, the St. Lawrence River is an essential natural and cultural resource. The shores of the river and its tributaries are home to over 80% of Québec's population, and 50% of Quebecers get their drinking water from these watercourses (World Wildlife Fund, n.d.). Some urban scholars are finding among Montrealers a growing love of the waters that surround our island (Dagenais, 2011), perhaps a reflection of the larger arc of stages of human engagement with adjacent rivers: from being 'unhonoured' during industrialization to 'forgotten' during post-industrialization, the contemporary River is now 'waiting' for a move to a relationship oriented to 'sustainability' (Pinto & Kondolf, 2015).

I aim to promote such a relationship through textiles' familiarity, comfort and tactility. The visual work of *Walk in the Water* is a large (9 feet high by 12 feet wide) textile map in eight layers of cloth, each representing either the shape of the changed shoreline at a specific moment in time or the river's waters themselves. Drawing on an overlay of historical drawn maps, aerial photographs and contemporary Google images, *Walk in the Water* uses textile piecing and digital embroidery to version natural and built structures and related texts, and includes five touch-activated switches that at the viewer's intervention playback audio excerpts of river stories. Working on a base of natural painter's linen, my team and I added smaller pieces of silks and organzas, their relative transparency allowing for optical mixing of colours through layers and gesturing towards my training as a painter. Digital embroidery's precision rendering enabled key roadways and parks to be labeled – and so the viewer can locate themselves in space – as well as the inclusion of a line of text strung along and emphasizing the original (1801 mapped) edge of Pointe-St-Charles:

In Pointe-St-Charles, we long for our shorefronts: the creatures and waters of the St. Lawrence River. In 1801, it was our front vista, right along this edge. Now, it is a

kilometre away, past infilling, railway tracks, highways and fences. How can our River become 'home'?



Fig. 8. Kathleen Vaughan, *Walk in the Water* (detail), showing the multiple layers of cloth, each for a mapped moment of infilling (note the date of the shoreline rendering centre-right), plus the position of the River in two instances: now, and as originally present, just beneath the 1801 layer. This top river layer moves on a runner like a curtain, so that the areas of land below can be semi-concealed, offering an impression of what the original shore might have approximated, with the wee divot that was indeed the erstwhile point of Pointe-St-Charles. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay

Additionally, the map includes five touch sensitive trigger points (see upper left corner of Fig. 8), ovals embroidered with conductive thread that, when the circuit is completed by a human touch, trips the playback of an excerpt for local interviews, each a 1- to 2-minute highlight of a longer discussion of the River, its meanings, its pasts and futures. Among the voices heard is that of the River itself, recorded below the water surface with a hydrophone³. I hope that the sensorial richness of the textiles, plus signage that

³ This recording was done for the project by sound artist Philip Lichti, one of many individuals – graduate students and technical experts, who helped create this project and to whom I owe a great debt of thanks for their effort and engagement: Joanna Donehower, Emma Hoch, RythÀ Kesselring, Jacob Le Gallais, Nicole Macoretta, Gen Moisan, Kay Noele, Martin Peach, Eric Powell and Jill Thompson, as well as Phil.

reassures people that they are indeed allowed to touch this work of art, the playback of a varying range of stories and wishes for the River, will together encourage the deeper connection that may lead to more direct encounters with the waters themselves – even if those at the edge of the Point remain out of reach.



Fig. 9. *Walk in the Water*, detail, with audio-triggering, touch-sensitive script. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay

A Concluding Word about Textiles

As art, craft, domestic item, object throwaway, textiles span human engagement with the world and are thick with meaning. Handwork in particular tends to take time and just can't be hurried or glossed, so our projects are time-consuming to accomplish: *Walk in the Water* took a full two years. At the same time, on this and most textile projects, many of the moments of stitching, cutting, ironing, adhering, warping, layering, planning and finishing are relatively banal and easily done without full attention. This means that textile work can be happily done in community, accelerated by others' helping hands and encouraged by the stories people tell as they work. Textiles build community: they've even been shown to build a sense of democracy in stitchers (Adams, 2002). The 'slow cloth' movement (Lipson, 2012) would have us make and teach with great consciousness, attention and care, giving

the work and ourselves the time we need. Of course, as objects of labour (Livingstone & Ploof, 2007), industrialized for commercial production, textiles have the capacity to promote or discount labour justice, depending on how the workers are treated and remunerated. And indeed, textile production has a huge impact on our environment too, accelerating climate change and degradation – with the global clothing industry (just a portion of the textile industry) is responsible for 10% of global annual greenhouse gas emissions, more than the combined emissions of all airlines and maritime shipping (Montgomery, 2019). Walloped by such impacts, many fibre artists are turning to sustainable and recycled textiles to reduce our own ecological footprint. In working with textiles, we three value these complexities, just as we do textiles' capacity to embed and portray cultural histories and identities. Textiles themselves thus become both content and form, whose resonances amplify our engagement with place(s) as artists and educators with hands in materials.

References

Adams, J. (2002). Art in social movements: Shantytown women's protests in Pinochet's Chile. *Sociological Forum* 17(1), 21-56.

Bennett, J. (2001). *The enchantment of modern life: Attachments, crossings, ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books.

Callañaupa Alvarez, N. (2007). *Weaving in the Peruvian highlands: Dreaming patterns, weaving memories*. Cusco, Peru: Center for Traditional Textiles.

Dagenais, M. (2011). *Montréal et l'eau : Une histoire environnementale*. Montréal, QC.: Les éditions du Boréal.

Harmon, K. (ed). (2004). *You are here: Personal geographies and other maps of the imagination*. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.

Heffez, A. (2010). Down in the dumps of Pointe-St-Charles history. *SpacingMontreal* [online magazine]. Retrieved from <http://spacing.ca/montreal/2010/12/27/down-in-the-dumps-of-pointe-saint-charles-history/>

Lippard, L. R. (1997). *The lure of the local: Senses of place in a multicentered society*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Lipson, E. (2012). The Slow Cloth Manifesto: An Alternative to the Politics of Production. *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1710&context=tsaconf>

Livingstone, J. & Ploof, J. (Eds.). (2007). *The object of labour: Art, cloth and cultural production*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Montgomery, J. (2019). How your clothes can save the planet. *TEDxTalks*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiNDjnJBSsA&feature=youtu.be>

Pinto, P. & Kondolf, G.M. (2015). Rivers in urban history: Tales of fear, harmony, destruction and opportunity. Paper presented at the I.S. Rivers Conference, Lyon, France, June 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.graie.org/ISRivers/docs/papers/1D12-49607PIN.pdf>

Vaughan, K., High, S. & Craven, E. (2017). *The Right to the City @ Atwater Library* [exhibition catalogue]. Montreal, QC.

World Wildlife Fund. (n.d.). Watershed reports: Canada: St. Lawrence. Retrieved from http://watershedreports.wwf.ca/?_ga=2.14831926.1619936068.1539035117-1311215236.1539035117#ws-21/by/threat-overall/profile

CRÉA ÉDITIONS

ISBN 978-2-923999-05-0