

WHEN NOBODY WAS HERE

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Abstract

When Nobody Was Here is a visual arts Thesis project documenting the collaborative making of a 45-foot cloth banner. It is part of an ongoing conversation in my work about the untold stories found within the context of Canada's settler-colonial history. Beginning with historical misrepresentation, the project invites individuals to create fabric assemblages for the banner in response to ideas about generational knowledge. Together, the assembled pieces create an unplanned narrative across the surface of the banner. I use screen captures and video clips in a digital montage to document and reflect the mood of the project. The banner and the video montage work together to encapsulate the past through a process of locating the social, political, and natural interconnections we carry with us in our day-to-day lives. This paper is written to support my thesis project.

Dedication

*For my parents, my children, and my
grandchildren, who have all helped
bring this project to life.*

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Part One: Introduction

Bristle

...*I didn't ask for a song and a dance*, she would say, and, as a mother of five, time was strictly afforded to the day-to-day tasks of running a household, working, and going to school. Were she here today, she likely would be saying, *just write the damn paper*. But if time allowed, or mood perhaps, it might be, *write it like you would say it*, lending credence to the notion that my ideas are valid and could be written in the moment without a song and a dance. Decades later, I found myself giving this same advice to my daughter: *use your voice*. I still hear my mother's words today (and feel her impatience bristling) as I bring her memory to my thesis project, *When Nobody Was Here*.

Circumstance

Guided by personal memory, my thesis project backslides to the 1990s when my young daughter skipped home from school saying ...*when nobody was here*. Her words repeated the same lesson I had learned at school that Canada had been built upon a vast and empty place belonging to no one.¹ The shared history lesson at once erased and made indifferent a past that connects very differently to my daughter's Indigeneity than to my settler background. The moment presented a doggedness to me about Canada's history, highlighting the disjointedness

¹ The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* was passed in Canada only recently, on June 21, 2021.

between the telling of history and the circumstances of the day. It is this historical tension² that informs my visual arts practice and gives direction to my thesis project.



Figure 1, Shawn Grey, *Park trees*, video montage image, 2022

At its heart, *When Nobody Was Here* is a collaborative project focusing on the everyday within the context of Canada’s settler-colonial history. It pays attention to how we carry knowledge and to how the notion of the mundane, or the unseen, from both the past and the present connects (or collides) with our daily lives. To achieve this, the project documents the making of a large four-foot by 45-foot-wide cloth banner that serves to engage a conversation

² Ongoing Indigenous/settler tensions in Canada are contextualized by the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Hon. Justice Murray Sinclair and Commissioners Dr. Mary Wilson and Chief Wilton Littlechild show how Christian claims of ‘moral justification’ based on the *Doctrine of Discovery* issued in the 15th century by Pope Alexander VI drove imperial conquest in North America.

about Canada's four-hundred-year-old history. To begin, collaborators are invited to the project to create fabric-based assemblages to be stitched onto the banner. These pieces independently form an unplanned narrative across the surface of the banner. I use video montage to arrange voice clips, footage of park trees, and imagery of my hand stitching to document the process of building the banner; I convey its mood by including city soundscapes. The banner and video montage will be presented at York University's Special Projects Gallery from April 18 to 22, 2022. In keeping with the project's experiential nature, materials will be available on site inviting those who visit to add to the banner.



Figure 2, Shawn Grey, Generational knowledge, video montage image, 2021

The purpose of *When Nobody Was Here* is to create a space to encourage moments of pause for those overlooked or untold stories, and to bring awareness to our shared language of understanding. The project invites collaborators to stitch, draw, or assemble objects, using supplied materials, in response to a discussion about how we connect to the broader social orders and environments that have brought us to where we are today.

In this collaborative work I chose the image of a tree as a unifying symbol to open the project and to begin its dialogue. The tree, relating to familial constructions and continuity, serves as an imaginative point of entry for individuals working on the project. From this dialogue a constellation of themes emerged including the home, migration, foot trails and pathways, bat blessings, bees, growth charts, and pages from old history books. I include fragments from these conversations as screen captures and sound clips in the second part of my thesis work, which is a video montage documenting touchstones of the project's progress and interconnections. The video montage overlays and places patterns, both visual and audial, found within disparate sounds and scales of the urban experience of contemporary life.

I chose video as a method of documentation for the project because of the camera's portability and for the distribution potential of the final video montage. The function of using video as a composition tool works in two ways. Firstly, the camera captures details and visual patterns that I may miss in the moment, such as the silver night lights reflecting off tree trunks in hair-like strand patterns. Secondly, images collected on my camera roll reveal unintended sequences of patterns or gestures I may have overlooked in real time, such as the lifting of bird wings that match the upswing of budding tree branchlets. In the video montage, I work to place

the unexpected, or found patterns, that go unnoticed in the regular course of a day. During the thesis exhibition, the video montage will be projected within range of the gallery window inviting passersby inside to the gallery's interior space where the banner can be viewed, and stitched or drawn upon, from within its cloth circumference. Hooks suspended from the gallery ceiling will hold the banner at eye level in a circle formation measuring approximately 15 feet in diameter. The exhibition serves as part of the collaborative process, inviting participation to the project's conversation. The project releases visitors from the role of viewer, should they choose, to become part of the project, to actively engage with its subject matter and with its form.

Building on personal memory as a point of entry into a conversation about the impacts of Canada's settler-colonial history *When Nobody Was Here* seeks to locate the past through a latticework of social, political, and natural placements, which in real life, can feel arbitrary. The project yields to this arbitrariness allowing its physical components to form their own narratives. Both the banner and video montage hold a procession of ideas linking the notions of memory, shared knowledge, and shared space. Before I had even begun stitching the banner, the project embodied a sense of the unexpected as pandemic lockdowns and shifting health measures brought uncertainty across the globe.

I posted a call-out on social media for project collaborators without knowing whether it would proceed at the physical site of the park as intended, or would need to be adapted to an online format. Circulated primarily amongst my personal and professional spheres of contact, the call led to the formation of a relational grouping consisting of family, extended family, friends, neighbours, and colleagues from both inside and outside the art world. I parcelled 28 portable

material kits from the contents of the supply bins I had prepared for working in the park.

Collaborators would work remotely guided by three online meetings and two online workshops.

It was agreed the most practical approach to assembling the banner would be for me to arrange and stitch completed pieces onto the banner as I received them. Though the facilitation of the project adopted a virtual format the objectives remained the same: to focus on creating a collective banner documenting our engagement with the histories that shape our lives.



Figure 3, Shawn Grey, *Branches at Grange Park, photo, 2021*

Part Two

Carrier Bags

Fran³ texted me when she got home, excited to open her fabric kit. Because the project had adapted to a virtual format, I decided to package the supplies in handmade carrier bags. Without the benefit of in-person meetings for the project, I looked to the language of fabric as a tool of communication that could speak on my behalf in the absence of my physical presence. I started calling the carrier bags “meditation kits” after learning that my young grandson, Lucien, calls his drawing portfolio a meditation kit. Likewise, I wished for collaborators to feel relaxed and at ease while working on their projects with a functional and bountiful kit. The kits were intended as gifts to acknowledge collaborators’ generosity of time and consideration, for their willingness to learn new, or to bring existing sewing skills to the project, and for being part of the online discussions to share thematic developments and logistical updates.

In her essay, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, American author Ursula Le Guin speaks to the history of human invention based on the research of anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher.⁴ Le Guin argues that historical shifts can take place by considering day-to-day practicalities in

³ I have used first names of collaborators throughout the body of this essay.

⁴ Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*: 29.

relation to the stories that take up the most space in the human collective. She describes the spear as symbolizing the dominant narrative of human history in terms of a *killing story* that is a motif of war, conquest, adventure, and excitement. Le Guin posits that by comparison, the carrier bag, supporting the practicalities of daily routine, such as holding, carrying, and containing, does not lend itself to an outsized story. The carrier bag story is about human continuity, not conquest. The ordinary nature of the carrier bag slides into a quieter realm of the everyday, as a ubiquitous object whose innovation reinforces values about connection. Le Guin's essay describes the significance of what it meant for early humans to imagine and to make a carrying device, to hold berries for example, or a sling in which to carry an infant. The carrier bag positions the entire arc of human history as an ongoing narrative and Le Guin transposes it into a broad symbol representing a container that holds humanity. It activates the hidden, contained, and overlooked stories offering knowledge about the everyday workings of human beings and the connection required for the survival of our species. Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction situates the philosophy of my research where the quiet presence of the bag parallels the unspoken pieces of our histories.



Figure 4, Shawn Grey, Making the carrier bags, video montage image, 2021

I took Le Guin's essay to heart as I stitched the sets of carrier bags for each of the project's collaborators imagining their stories connecting, or conversely, clashing, with one another. The individual kits introduced an aspect of care to the project that would not have happened had the supplies been issued en masse in the park from large plastic tubs. Supplying the materials in handcrafted bags brought an unexpected intimacy to the project, shifting focus away from the constraints of social distancing. Lined and zippered, the bags were assembled into unique sets designed for longevity and use beyond the scope of the project. Because the project had moved online and collaborators would be working on their pieces individually, the initial four-week timespan scheduled for group work in the park was no longer relevant. Consequently, I extended the September timeline to December 2021 to accommodate the delivery of kits and also relaxed the timeline to return finished pieces into the new year. Slowing the pace of the project invited collaborators to a process of deep contemplation allowing for time to commit to complex stitching techniques or other modes of assembly. The extended timeline eased the sense of having to produce something hurriedly, or on the fly for the project.

Instructions in the material kits explained the premise of the project with a request to design a motif from the materials provided, using the tree as a prompt to interpret the notion of generational knowledge within the context of colonization. The kits contained a packet of assorted fabrics, dressmakers' marker paper, a template of the banner scaled to size, a second zippered pouch with a set of hand sewing tools, plus a third, smaller pouch with drawing materials. The fabrics included polyester and silks in chiffon-type weaves similar to or lighter than the weight and drape of the base banner, a two-toned green polyester. I intentionally limited the colour range to primarily greens and yellows to ensure visual cohesiveness. My goal in taking the time to make the carrier bags was to express a sense of value and appreciation for the forthcoming contributions.



Figure 5, Shawn Grey, Meditation kits, photos, 2021

As I received the completed works, collaborators shared their inspirations, creative processes, challenges, and the meanings of the pieces they had created. Some collaborators substituted kit supplies with alternate materials. My son-in-law, William, for example, chose to

use the cyanotype process (a solar activated blueprint technology) of placing physical objects onto sheets of photosensitive fabrics, resulting in a series of cyan coloured relief images. This led to his further investigation of the transformative powers of chemical dye, and processes akin to how the oxidization of indigo transforms from an emerald green to brilliant peacock blue until it settles into its deep indigo hue. William's piece for the banner depicts a planetary arrangement of earth-based images composed from an assortment of twigs, rocks, acorns, and feathers that he and his children (my grandchildren) had collected while revisiting the same ravine paths he had explored as a child with his father. The sharing of generational knowledge with his children speaks to his family's connection to nature, to earth, and more broadly to the experience of the expansiveness and preciousness of the time we have here, in a world that does not depend on human presence or contact. The notion of deep time recurs across the banner with references to our relationships with the natural world, placing nature as a significant part of the banner's presence.

A painting from my brother, Neville, portrays a full moon above an embroidered map depicting the Carrying Place, a trail stretching from Lake Ontario to Lake Simcoe along the Humber River.⁵ Neville references the trail in relation to the walks that my youngest daughter and I would take around Grange Park and through Chinatown as our evening ritual when she was a child. The moon, the mappings, and an image of the CN Tower placed on a repurposed pillowcase once belonging to our late mother situates our family lineage across past and future generations of different peoples sharing the geographies and networks that have become our

⁵ Ange Loft, *Remember Like We Do*: 17-28.

homes. Le Guin writes about the *home being a larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people*⁶ which I envision as a place of interconnection, like the banner.



Figure 6, Shawn Grey, Composing the banner, photo, 2022

In January when the ground was snow covered, I took the banner to Grange Park to drape it from the Chestnut tree with low reaching branches to begin composing the banner pieces. I approached the composition by reading the pieces visually according to colour, scale, and texture, followed by content and context. Narrative vignettes took shape as I pinned groupings together on the banner which had started to ripple and billow in the below freezing gusts of wind.

⁶ Ursula K Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag of Fiction*: 32.



Figure 7, Shawn Grey, Wind in Grange Park, video screen capture, 2022

I was bemused how coincidental subset groupings formed amongst the visual arrangements. For example, the cyanotype solar system became a universe enveloping the small winged fox, a drawing by my son Denesee, that sauntered toward the Carrying Place moonscape painting. These three pieces were each made by men who all happen to be a brother to someone in their lives. Next to this grouping, a segment with pieces created by women who happen to be sisters features a moon portrait on a winged maple seed pod floating toward a school of printed fish. Next to that, a grouping by grandmothers, myself included, speaking to the intricate layers of presence, identity and naming. Together, all three groupings are like a family portrait with

multiple points of connection mapping family and extended family members across the banner universe. The banner holds seven sections or ‘vignettes’ about migration and journey, seeing, imagination, movement of veins in leaves, an entwined dispersal of knowledge, dispersal of seeds, the home as a soft and protective place, and the stress of not having a home.



Figure 8, Shawn Grey, Brother vignette: William, Denesee, Neville, photo, 2022

Most striking about all the works received is the level of care and depth of meaning put into the pieces. Collaborators tested and honed techniques, taking the time needed to locate places of resonance for themselves in order to connect with their creative processes which speaks beyond the work itself. Parallel to this, the video montage gathers threads of conversations and sequences them as if they were found elements, like the sound of birds in trees, or the whooshing of traffic stopping then starting. The narrative invites an engagement with history beyond the

project while the physical banner encircles its visitors who hold the present. Together, the banner and video projection, like the carrier bag, hold and transport seemingly arbitrary messages that becomes a collective reading of our humanity.

Park Trees

The global COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a series of unexpected health and safety protocols and regional lockdowns in early 2020. While on the one hand, the health regulations that had limited personal contact in real time, afforded me, on the other hand, time to visit individual park trees on a regular basis over the course of Toronto's pandemic measures. This ritual amplified a sense of pacing within the everyday that is so often driven by busyness and elements beyond one's control. The pandemic, the park, and the trees became part of my everyday routine, joining my network of relationships. The park milieu became an internal guiding voice directing me through the pandemic and into this project.

I delivered the first fabric kit to Fran, who is a beekeeper, in September, at the northeast corner of Grange Park, as we had prearranged. I waited beside the pair of Black Locust trees flanked by the Horse Chestnut trees just steps from the Art Gallery of Ontario. We both wore face masks and maintained a distance of two arms lengths apart for our brief exchange, just long enough to pass the kit along, reserving conversation for upcoming online meetings. Initially, the plan was to conduct the entire banner portion of the project amongst the grouping of trees that would offer shelter from the natural elements, where park benches could serve as supply stations. The plan had been to place the banner on a length of canvas to keep sewing needles from falling

into the grass. At its conclusion, collaborators would carry the banner in a circle formation as a human carousel embodying the multiple histories we carry.



Figure 9, Shawn Grey, Park trees at Grange Park, photo, 2021

I lingered to take in the trees, drawn by the shadowy ridges on the trunks of the Black Locusts. I counted five tents across the park wondering if the unhoused residents would make it through the winter or be forcibly removed by city police. A neighbourhood hub, used around the clock, Grange Park was bequeathed to the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1910 and is currently maintained by the City of Toronto.⁷ Like most parts of the city, Grange Park falls within the boundaries of the Toronto Purchase, which is part of Treaty 13, most recently renegotiated in 2010, between the Mississaugas of the Credit and the Crown.⁸ A binding legal agreement, the

⁷ Art Gallery of Ontario. "History of the Grange." <http://www.ago.net/history-of-the-grange>.

⁸ Margaret Sault, *A Story About the Toronto Purchase*: 37-44.

Treaty is an example of living history holding space in the present. Treaties are a constant reminder of the political backdrop to the city's geo-political origins. The presence of people living in the park, another backdrop, points to the climate of social and economic disparity for many in the city. These backdrops situate the political environment from which I work. The park pulls me into its conversation across years and landscapes. The hovering social orders punctuate the margins between the steps of the art gallery and the tents pitched next to the park paths. It reminds me of the tensions between our lived and imagined histories.

Subterranean Park

Canadian performance artist Camille Turner re-envisioned the Grange neighbourhood history from the future by locating and re-marking unmarked Black history sites. Her participatory project, *BlackGrange*,⁹ first performed in 2018, is available online as a self-guided walking tour of the Grange neighbourhood. The walk includes a stop at Queen and Peter Streets, just south of Grange Park, to commemorate the life and resistance of Peggy Pompadour (1766-1810) a Black woman who was enslaved, as were her three children, by Peter Russell, the Receiver General of Upper Canada at that time, and his sister Elizabeth Russell.¹⁰ The visible remnants of this story today are naming conventions: Peter Street and the now subterranean Russell Creek¹¹ streaming diagonally beneath Grange Park bear only Peter Russell's name.

⁹ Camille Turner, *BlackGrange* Project. <http://camilleturner.com/project/blackgrange>.

¹⁰ Ontario Ministry of Government and Consumer Services. Archive. *Peggy as Difficult Property. Slaves as Property*. <http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/slavery/peggy>.

¹¹ I learned of Russell Creek through Lost Rivers Toronto, an organization that advocates for the daylighting of the city's buried waterways. <https://www.lostrivers.ca>.

I'm drawn to the political and social content of Turner's work and its participatory form which is also content. The participatory element redirects the role of audience to that of active participant to collectively witness and remember the past from an envisioned future. I'm interested in art as an energy that brings people to the heart of its purpose, specifically how it can transform perception through physical engagement shifting art away from an experience of passive consumption.



Figure 10, Shawn Grey, Banner and trees in Grange Park, photo, 2022

Veins of past and present stories give nuance to how I interpret the happenings around me asking how to recover silenced histories and understand their meanings. The origins of Treaties, enslavements, and naming conventions saturate my local walking routes. As I walk through the park, the trees stand as markers of a different kind of time, a slower and more expansive kind of time. I think of the years and decades the trees have been rooted in the environment, absorbing

water, preventing erosion, and breathing in carbon dioxide to release oxygen. They provide a space of meditation in the urban landscape that for me is usually blaring with horns and sirens. Their slowness, slows me. I walk through the park; the trees a constant fact, pausing my day, at least for the ten minutes it takes to traverse the park. They provide a natural framework of connection for my work as much as the weight of the social histories that they hold. The presence of untold stories transforms prevailing narrative in the way the presence of a red-tailed hawk or young fox in the urban landscape at Grange Park instills a sense of awe into daily life. It is these unexpected moments that inspire my work, like the ping of my child's voice unknowingly challenging the four-hundred-year-old story working to silence her, and that command my attention.



Figure 11, Shawn Grey, Sarah's printed fish, photo, 2022

Part Three

Collaboration

When Nobody Was Here flows from my experience of civic engagement, which like the catalyst of this project, became part of my life while living in Scarborough, Ontario, during the 1990s. Advocating on behalf of my children helped me navigate the duality of how I am both connected to yet not part of the Indigenous communities in Toronto. It is a nebulous experience of being neither here nor there that at the same time requires my presence and attention to the meaning of difference. I started to notice for example, how the use of language, and the weight of words and phrases, charge situations. *Half-person, tanned, or your house is very clean, or you should clean your house more* imply a personal value judgment, for example, depending on their delivery and by whom. I began to see the persistence of covert racism at an institutional level—subtle mechanisms of erasure minimizing Indigenous history through racist naming conventions at summer camps, or invasive lines of medical questions and assumptions.

This began to reveal the racism quietly lodged in my own blind spots, pointing to the ease with which my whiteness carries me in Canadian society. Blind spots holding the weight of invisibility and indifference is what drives my practice. The blind spots point to a betrayal in the telling of history, to the collective loss of knowledge and context of our own histories. My practice works toward uncovering personal and historical blind spots in the everyday, to bring me closer to the losses they hold, and the humanity they resist.

Reconciliation would seem to be a logical step to mending divides and addressing

generations of misinformation. Métis artist and scholar Julie Nagam asserts that the static narrative of Canada's history stalls a true reconciliation¹² and Elwood Jimmy (Thunderchild First Nation) and Brazilian educator Vanessa Andreotti point to how hoped for reconciliation will fail or fall apart¹³ when the the underlying structures of organizations maintain colonial mindsets. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire would identify acts of reconciliation that do not change the structure of oppression as an act of false generosity¹⁴ implying a hollow performance, where intentions may offer an act of kindness but without long term change. This is what I mean by collective loss; when we see the outcomes and impacts of our histories, take steps to repair and mend them, but long lasting change cannot happen. Without shifting the imperial values that built Canada, reconciliation is a trope. *When Nobody Was Here* views the collective loss of our history as part of a grieving process recognizing that change is a slow, incremental process.

When Nobody Was Here approaches collective loss through an experiential methodology taken from an earlier artistic collaboration, *Buffalo Jump Ahead*, which I co-conceived and organized in 1993 with my then partner, artist and muralist Simon Paul Dene from the Dene Nation. We developed the arts-based project in response to our children's school curriculum and to counter overt racism in the neighbourhood. Visual artists and musicians from Shadowland Theatre¹⁵ from Ward's Island brought the concept of visual storytelling and processional art to the project. Annual iterations of the *Buffalo Jump Ahead* project took place as *Unity Walks* until

¹² Julie Nagam, *Deciphering the Refusal of the Digital and Binary Codes of Sovereignty/Self-Determination and Civilized/Savage*.2016: 79.

¹³ Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti, *Towards Braiding*:29.

¹⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 44.

¹⁵ Shadowland Theatre, Ward's Island Toronto. <https://www.shadowlandtheatre.ca/history>

2008.¹⁶ The longevity of the *Buffalo Jump*, that continued as *Unity Walks*, was rooted in its collaborative process that created space for personal transformation. The walks highlighted the need for a collective expression of identity and plurality in our neighbourhoods. I learned from the walks how contributing to and being part of a procession can facilitate an embodiment, a vehicle of both personal and collective transformation.

I recall the charged moment of the *Buffalo Jump Ahead* project when stilt walkers led community members onto Galloway Road to the Scarborough Bluffs. Every participant contributed to the collectivity of the project, each bringing their own history to a new reading of the world. The experience folded time, expressing both the past and the present as one moment as each individual took their place in the procession. I continue to use collaboration in my work for this reason. *When Nobody Was Here* incorporates the idea of collaboration through the facilitation of an embodied process. While not delivered as an in-person experience, the project retains its interactive element through its online presence specifically bringing a community together that would otherwise not have connected to create a banner. Each collaborator becomes part of the conversation through online discussions and through the language of the works they create for the banner. At a future date, when health measures permit, we will gather in the park, carrying the banner in the formation of a human carousel, to experience its collectivity in person, in the presence of the wind embodying the past, focusing the present, with projections of the video montage to once again fold time.

¹⁶ I co-organized the *Buffalo Jump Ahead* project in 1993 and collaborated on the *Unity Walks* in 2007, 2008.



Figure 12, Shawn Grey, *Hands working*, video montage image, 2022

American author and theorist Donna Haraway uses the analogy of the cat's cradle string game to describe the nature of interconnection as a metaphorical tool of continuity.¹⁷ What I like about her analogy, and from what I remember playing the game, is how delineations seemingly appear and disappear according to how one holds, lifts, and releases sections of the string, repositioning the tension it holds to create or dissolve its linear patterns. Like the appearing and disappearing strings of the cat's cradle, *When Nobody Was Here* is open to forming and releasing its shape in the way fluidity is expressed through the movement of fabric in the wind or by how its ideas are held, carried, and contained, to then be dispersed once again. Open to new shapes that may or may not be visible, the project does not disappear, as our histories do not disappear

¹⁷ Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*: 10.

when out of sight or mind. In the string game, the strings are flexible, their movement dependent on how (multiple) players choose to shift them. The string represents how energies manifest and disperse, then reconnect again. In other words, the project may continue in another form as collaborators choose, or by chance, inadvertently shifting its direction in response to new sets of interconnections. The goal of interconnection, Haraway emphasizes, is not to reconcile or to restore histories, but instead to make space for recuperation. Interconnection can offer a place of contemplation, or a place to simply be aware of one's position, physically like the trees in the park with layers of the intangible social, economic, and political interconnections. The banner gathers up energy to be released again, not as a conquering tool, but like the carrier bag, as a tool of continuity



Figure 13, Shawn Grey, In relation to pigeons and trees, video montage image, 2022

During our online meetings, we spoke about interconnection in relation to how the world, our worlds, are divided by classifications where the locust tree, for example, is identified as an invasive species, a discourse that feeds anti-Asian racism. From this conversation came a discussion about dominant narratives that overlook positive attributes. Carrienne introduced the symbol of the bat, and the blessings bats carry in Chinese culture, representing the love of harmony, virtue, long life, wealth and peaceful death. Carrienne had stitched an arrangement of five bats which she gifted to the project, sharing the knowledge of its blessings, which is a blessing to the group and to the banner. In this context, the bat brings new meaning to the banner, outside of a western representation of the bat. The concept of a good death intrigues me. Haraway describes a good death as part of life's interconnection, that it is part of the mindset of what she calls *staying with the trouble*, where death is part of life, inferring the need to connect with all parts of life.¹⁸

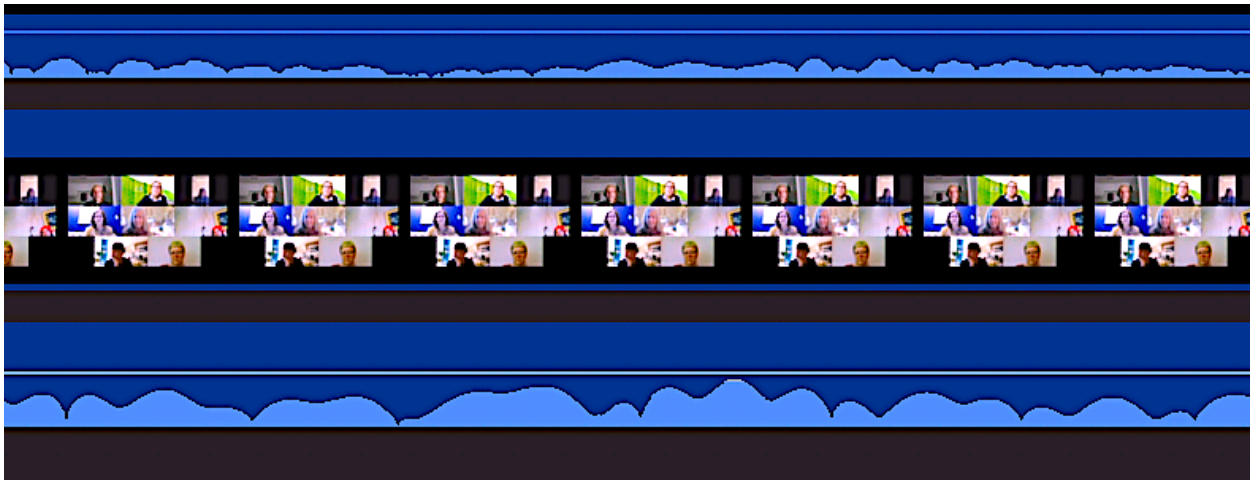


Figure 14, Shawn Grey, *Digital conversation patterns*, screen capture, 2021.

¹⁸ Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*: 1.

For a while I recorded the phone calls that replaced the in-person meetings where we would have been looking at each others' work, or handing a half-stitched leaf motif across a park bench, *how can I fix this?* Some recordings expressed uncertainty, *I didn't realize I would be working with fabric. I have to make something? I haven't sewn anything before.* During meetings hesitancy came up about stitching, about not having the skills, or practice. At other times, the opposite was expressed: *I have a reason to use my hand made embroidery hoop now, and this will be meditative.* Hitoko traced the pitfalls of dressmaker proprietors competing against global fast fashion markets and the loss of hand skills. Bonnie shared how she found a stash of her late mother's *how-to* books with appliqué instructions for the puffing technique she would use on the Black Locust branchlet of leaves, representing the softness to be found in the everyday, encouraging a look beyond the definition of undesirable.

Often, the discussion paused online, while facts were gathered about the Toronto Purchase, the Carrying Place trail, or to confirm the street names around the Grange. After a while the discussion shifted: *Can I add my own ribbons? Do you mind if I use a different fabric?* When contributions were completed and mailed back to me, they arrived with cautions: *...this is not perfect, my piece won't fit in with all the other work.* Invariably, the making of each piece reflected care, kindness, and attention to the larger themes brought to the project.

Each piece became a point of interconnection on the banner. The pieces were delivered with expressions of gratitude from collaborators for being part the project and for the opportunity to make something by hand. Collaborators shared their works, detailing their connections to the meanings of the pieces, and frequently with concern the techniques used may not have met a

standard I had not set but which they had carried in their minds. I felt overwhelmed receiving works that held such care and integrity.

The open-ended nature of *When Nobody Was Here* reflects a process that involves an element of trust throughout the project. How individuals choose to contribute to the project requires myself, and each collaborator, to yield to the project's process and outcome. It means relinquishing, and adapting, to the evolution of the project according to how individuals choose to contribute to the project. This builds an element of reciprocity into the project. The culmination of the project rests with how individuals and each of their pieces interrelate with one another and to the project as a whole.

Reaching beyond my own spheres of knowledge, I consider the idea of ubiquitous expertise, which is a concept recognizing the value of integrating common knowledge into niche bodies of scientific knowledge as a collaborative approach to scientific problem solving.¹⁹ I mention ubiquitous expertise not as an artistic convention, or as a solution to resolving inequality or injustice, or racism, in relation to my project in general, but as an approach to knowledge creation. Incorporating different levels and types of expertise into a project seeks to bridge gaps of tacit knowledge and aims to mend, at some level, mistrust between communities. It can open the door to knowledge sharing.

While my project, *When Nobody Was Here*, seeks multiplicity and yields to the direction and choices of its collaborators, I am the person guiding the project and who established its structure. To challenge the institutional structures associated with the project at a deeper level

¹⁹ Ubiquitous expertise is a concept recognizing specific common knowledge as a valuable contribution to bodies of scientific knowledge. The term was coined by Harry Collins, a British Social Sciences researcher in *Are We All Scientific Experts Now?:* 62.

would require approaching collaborators prior to initiating the project. The project functions within the parameters of its scope, prioritizing the perspectives of collaborators working on the banner portion of the project, accepting and meeting the various technical and artistic skill levels brought to the project. The collaborative aspect of the project achieves its goal within the project to create a space where meaning can be brought, or generated anew, by everyone involved.

Related to the idea of ubiquitous expertise as one way of sharing knowledge, from the angle of contemporary art, I refer to Canadian artist Ken Lum, who speaks to social impositions (meaning experiences of racism, inequity and injustice) as factors of contemporary art in relation to intentional artistic placements of disruption. Similar to how the story of the carrier bag carries its own voice in its own way in the face of louder conquest stories, disruption interrupts dominant narratives. Lum posits that when an action or symbol creates its own separate space within a dominant force it creates a transformative energy.²⁰ The disruption, which can be a presence, knowledge, or the unexpected, creates a distinction that challenges hegemonic order. The act of disruption can be seen as a form of ritual in that it transforms space and brings new meaning to a situation.

²⁰ Ken Lum, "Constellation of Terms," Keynote Speech, *Becoming Public Art: Working Models and Case Studies for Art in Public* from Oct. 13 – Dec. 11, 2020.



Figure 15, Shawn Grey, *Art outside the gallery*, video montage image, 2022

German art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann²¹ sees the museum or gallery as a physical embodiment of ritual in their capacity as cultural institutions. In relation with the context of ritual in prehistoric times, Von Hantelmann situates the gallery as being a distinct place separate from the everyday because it holds and reflects the values and identities of individual members who collectively belong to a community. British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner wrote about ritual in relation to the public where liminality, or what he calls the threshold of space, is a distinct space *full of potency and potentiality*²² which parallels Lum's

²¹ Hantelmann, Dorothea von. "The Exhibition. A Lecture Demonstration." Lecture/Demonstration presented at Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade, Beograd, Serbia September 19, 2018. Accessed October 16, 2020 <http://wscsd.com/index.php/video>.

²² Victor Turner, *Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality*: 465.

discussion about the power of disruption. Von Hantelmann notes that the gallery (public institution) is not a neutral place, but one embedded in centuries of power and authority where even exhibition signage carries the weight of its institutional authority. Performance art, considered a liminal space, disrupts as a place of distinction separate from the everyday. I am interested in the versatility of space that can be part of the everyday, shift to a place of distinction, and back again. It allows for common access to ritual that reminds us of our humanity in the everyday.

The charged moment from the *Buffalo Jump Ahead* project for me was a place of distinction and one of disruption for the community. It affected change in the community giving pause to the school curriculum while embodying the presence of a community that had faced hostility from within its own neighbourhood. While my work relates to transformative aspects of performative art, my use of transformation originates from community development and from the experience of navigating difference in my personal life. I incorporate the use of transformation by applying techniques taken from a pedagogy of experiential learning.²³ This integrates trust building, a practice of self-reflexivity, critical analysis, and synthesis within a given scope of a group or project. I seek multiple voices as a way to include what I may not see or understand as part of a reciprocal exchange of information—hence my focus on multiplicity with *When Nobody Was Here*, where the principles of experiential learning are part of my methodology. Experiential learning is a pathway for a visceral experience of ritual in my work, not as a religious, ceremonial, or theoretical anchor, but as a practical and self-reflective

²³ Alice Kolb and David Kolb. *The Learning Way: Meta-Cognitive Aspects of Experiential Learning*:299.

transformative tool.

Moving away from the specifics of facilitation, to a broader perspective of the global envelope shaping our lives, I refer to American author and scholar Jenny Odell,²⁴ who writes about *doing nothing* as an act of political disruption. Odell considers the ubiquitous nature of digital technology in relation to colonial-based extraction practices where one's time is now subject to colonization by way of the World Wide Web. The act of doing nothing (meaning to disengage from one's online presence) according to Odell restores one's own story in real time away from the digital world. Similarly, Camille Turner's walking tours (ironically, available online) makes space for the disembodied voices contained in centuries of the Grange neighbourhood's submerged histories. Both the disengagement from technology and engagement with untold histories create spaces within but distinct from the dominant narratives shaping expectations of daily life. Methodologies of disruption can access the lost self, the lost stories, and perhaps manifest the collective loss from our blind spots to bring a fulsome understanding of how we are connected to our worlds.

Entwinement

Entwinement was an early topic for the *When Nobody Was Here* project. The grandmother vignette on banner entwines ideas about naming, seeing, and being. This in turn speaks to identity, interrelationship, and to the co-mingling of three women with different life

²⁴ Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*: 22-24.

perspectives connected in a seemingly arbitrary way on the banner. They do connect, though, firstly as visual complements, and secondly, through a constellation not evident on the banner, through a generation of grandchildren connected to each of the women.

Carol appliquéd a composition of three women standing with the rising sun, representing her Indigenous name, which she then placed on a stylized leaf in relation to the project's guiding tree theme. To this she incorporated a multi-coloured piece of braid and attached tiny balsa wood branchlets carried by the women placed on the leaf. Carol's name acknowledges her presence in a system that has historically used naming conventions for societal dominance.



Figure 16, Shawn Grey, Grandmother vignette: Carol, Christine, Shawn, photo, 2021

Next to Carol's name on the banner, I placed Christine's piece, a work about the process of seeing. Christine started the meticulous process of removing single strands of thread from the

fabrics in her kit. Each strand removed opened a tiny row of space revealing more of what had previously been concealed behind the fabric. The repetition of removing threads began to speak on a deeper level to the idea of historical removal. This became a meditative ritual for Christine through which she found herself embodying the loss of erased histories as she became attuned to the weight and responsibility of Canada's history as she physically removed threads for *When Nobody Was Here*.

I am the third grandmother in this vignette. I had taken a length of fabric to Grange Park with pastels and fabric inks to take rubbings, or impressions, from the jagged textures of tree trunks. The process captured the patterns of the tree markings, formed over decades of growth in the park, which had reminded me of my own mortality evidenced by the markings on my own body also created over decades. All three reflect the power of presence situating our arbitrary interconnections that create meaning when positioned together on the banner. The grouping feels charged to me because I read it with the knowledge of the generations and complexities of womanhood the pieces entwine. Carol's naming counters the incorrect telling of Canada's narrative about empty space while Christine's un-threaded stripes create space to metaphorically see and experience our concealed history. The tree bark impressions serve as a backdrop of time to Carol's *naming* work and Christine's *seeing* work. The layering of the three pieces echoes the layering technique in the video montage, a deliberate edit to highlight connections taking place that seems like happenstance, but that creates meaning.

American performance and textile artist Sonya Clark uses thread removal to confront the

propaganda of the Confederate Battle flag. Her piece *The Unraveling*²⁵ is the result of inviting gallery viewers to help deconstruct a cotton Confederate Battle flag by removing its red, white, and blue cotton strands from the flag, dismantling its harm and inaccurate telling of American history. Clark deconstructs the flag and with it the Confederate narrative woven into the fabric of daily life. Clark establishes an intimacy in the gallery for this work to take place offering a safe place of entry to the history she wishes to address. Colonial histories are violent and painful to witness. The messiness of interconnection reflects this, and it is easy to see how it becomes an entanglement with no visible route to resolution when comfort clashes against realization.



Figure 17, Shawn Grey, *Fran's beeswax varnished leaves and dried nettle*, photo, 2022

²⁵ Sonya Clark, *Sonya Clark : Monumental Cloth, the Flag We Should Know*:14-16.

The title of this section *entwinement* was inspired by Fran's piece that incorporates the use of beeswax to varnish the leaves she fashioned from a nettle SCOBY (symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast used to make kombucha). Fran then entwined stinging nettle stems into ropes which she used to represent the Black Locust branchlets to which the leaves were then attached. The entwinements were then stitched onto translucent pieces of silk as her banner contribution. The dried SCOBY, wax, and nettle carry a warm, earthy fragrance that reminds me of a summertime field of wild grasses. The leaves move slightly when the banner is lifted. The dried leaves are visibly brittle with flakes of the dried SCOBY falling away from tiny fractures. The corded nettle which is also brittle exudes an aura of strength, perhaps because of the rope association. Fran had expressed to me she was not sure how to approach the topic of the project which is a fair comment. I looked to her *entwinements* as an answer to her question. They embodied exactly what the project had intended, to observe the entwinements of our histories. They encapsulate an interpretation of history, but also the entwinement taking place within the project itself expressing hesitancy, vulnerability, strength.

The temporality of the project offers varied nuances in relation to its reception, either in Grange Park, or another outdoor public location, compared to an indoor gallery or an online iteration. The benefit of the outdoor presentation is the inclusion of its local geography and histories experienced in the living moment. The wind, the grass, and city soundscapes become elements of the project as are the collaborators bringing their histories, memories and ideas to a park presentation. A gallery presentation lends itself to a 'viewing' by nature of the language and expectation of white-painted walls and enclosed spaces. An online presentation differs yet again, with conversation limited to technical capacity. Each setting offers its own nuance of experience

and its own set of potentialities, as Victor Turner may say. The potentials of different settings lend the project to a particular focus specific to the settings or collaborators. Borrowing a scientific approach, this could be read as an *agential cut* as American theorist Karen Barad²⁶ may interpret. Barad's reading of *cuts* acknowledges the reality of multiplicity, like Haraway's reference to string theory where reality forms and dissolves according to the shape and scope of its specific interconnections.

²⁶ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*: x.



Figure 18, Shawn Grey, Banner composite, photo montage, 2022

Part Four

Public Garment

I inadvertently started referring to the banner as a public garment when describing the project's initial hoped for goal of collaborators carrying the banner outdoors in a circle to form a spiralling human carousel. The plan was to simultaneously to project a video montage of imagery and sound clips to embody the past and present in the living moment. The intention was to carry history through time, locating one's position in relation to history. The banner would be worn, in a sense, as a garment of time, with light reflecting from images flickering across its moving surface.

Part of the concept of a public garment considers fabric as a language and a personal form of archiving by how we represent ourselves publicly. As a cultural and political object, the banner speaks to the history of flags and tapestries. As a utilitarian object, as in this project—it holds fabric assemblages, the banner as a cloth object is interwoven into the histories of labour and manufacturing practices that impact climate change, economics, and politics on a global level. My use of the banner can be read through a gender/class lens reflecting my positioning in society. I ran a small business designing and constructing cloth banners and soft furnishings from

my home. As a single woman, this was my economic solution to bridge the realities of generating an income while maintaining a physical presence in the home as my children entered their teen years. It was my response to the necessity of having to be present in two places at one time. It was during this time I met Hitoko, a textile artist, whose piece for the banner consists of short segments of cording stitched onto a silk rectangle to represent dispersal, as in seeds, or of an idea, carried by the wind, in a gradation of density to spaciousness. Hitoko used remnants of what is known as the people's thread that were too small to use in other projects but too valuable to discard. Using a traditional technique from Japan dating back to the seventh century, Hitoko created these threads using Japanese *washi* paper and then dyed them in fermented persimmon juice which makes the thread resilient, weather resistant, and long lasting. In its own fashion, the threads embody resilience.

Next to Hitoko's thread piece, is Kelly's grid of heat transfer images on silk depicting the multiple placement of the leather bound book cover of an 1805 publication of *The History of York* which draws us back to the Toronto Purchase and to Grange neighbourhood 1806 postings for the sale of the enslaved. The language used in the *History of York* carries an attitude that dehumanizes, assigning derogatory words to describe Indigenous individuals and populations. This goes back to the moral justification of imperial conquest, set out in Pope Alexander VI's *Doctrine of Discovery* (mentioned earlier in footnote 2). Together, Hitoko's *seed* and Kelly's *language* dispersals reflect the nuances of how information is delivered, who the information serves at a societal level, and impacts on a personal level, and continue a dialogue about the reach of institutional power. They contrast in nature with the whimsical winged fox on the

opposite side of the banner, sharing another form of knowledge dispersal centring the value of connecting with imagination across time.

Framing the people's thread and book covers are leaf motifs represented by Bonnie's and Fran's Black Locust branchlets and Stephanie's ribboned bird nest she positioned as one part of the scales of justice. As a large grouping, the leaves, seeds, books and nest reflect upon the layers of tension between social, economic, and political interests extending through generations in a larger human story that also contains the machinations of imperialism. Framing the fox in its brother vignette, are Ingrid's printed critters and the sister vignette with Crystal's and Sarah's portrayal of generational knowledge. Ingrid's critters are a result of her research about co-mingling of species across continents. Sarah's printed fish reference her appreciation of how her family's summer fishing trips were the passing of generational knowledge over several years. The maple seed pod, painted and embroidered by Crystal, speaks to the representation of the arbitrary and to the limitations of what we can do within the realities of our present life stations. This is the swath of narrative the project holds.

Going back to my park trees, and the unhoused they shelter, how does one respond to the everyday, to our histories, to the systemic structures brought into the everyday? In her essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, American writer Susan Sontag uses the photograph to ask, *who is responsible?*, challenging readers to *not flinch*,²⁷ to consider the luxury of choosing to *close one's eyelids*²⁸ while confronting depictions of humanity that show injustice, or violence. American

²⁷ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*: 50.

²⁸ Sontag, 152.

writer James Baldwin²⁹ approaches this question by looking at the fracturing of humanity. He concludes that it is those whose humanity is denied who are tasked with reflecting humanity back to those who disconnected from their own humanity. Baldwin's answer to my question is to not flinch but to witness the loss of one's own humanity, as if looking in a mirror, to see the reflection of that loss. American writer and activist bell hooks surveys the arc of historical injustice to consider the parallels of oppression between gender, race, and class that demarcate our shared loss of humanity. She writes,

*"Feminism as liberation struggle must exist apart from and as part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact."*³⁰

Multidisciplinary artist Tania Willard, from the Secwepemc Nation, writes about Camille Turner's approach to loss through her walking tours, tracing interrelation as a process of negotiation³¹ within her practice which is a process of continual self-reflexivity. Interrelatedness as a principle and practice responds to dominant social orders, it informs contemporary art. As we can see and understand, invisibility is a shared problem, not one designated to any particular group made to be invisible, or to be described as non-human. The collective loss of history is a betrayal to our humanity.

²⁹ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*: 56-71.

³⁰ hooks, bell *Talking Back*: 22.

³¹ Tania Willard, *Surfacing, Voicing and Signalling Freedom in Relational Performance: Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Camille Turner's Freedom Tours*: 25.



Figure 19, Shawn Grey, Chestnut branches at Grange Park, photo, 2021

Part Five:

Conclusion

Blind Stitching

The blind stitch presents as a contradiction. A thread is pulled in the opposite direction of the row it forms, causing a *one step forward, two back* rhythm that offers a sense of hesitancy, like going through a back door to get somewhere. The result is the appearance of two pieces of fabric seamlessly joined. It is a technique of connection, repair, and meditation. At times, I used the blind stitch to assemble fabric sequences onto the surface of the banner, pulled by the stitch's sense of duality going first in one direction, then another, and in the end, seeing the path it had created.

When Nobody Was Here is a process. It begins with a personal memory, tracing the steps I have taken to reach into a larger past than my own to reckon with the present. I have reached out to others inviting a community of collaborators to help me be part of picking up our histories and to make sense of what they hold. Like the blind stitching I used in the making of the banner, the project goes backward to move forward, assembling disjointed parts. It has felt nebulous,

grasping at what we cannot see, trying not to fall into the tropes of reconciliation and invisibility this paper describes. The banner and its own story speaks to the way we have travelled, and our arbitrary placements. The story arcs, revealing a landscape that is in part whimsical in a grand universe where droplets of knowledge are passed from one generation to the next, interconnecting. Bat blessings join puffed and brittle leaves, a gridded past, and a woven nest held by its ribbon-arms of justice weighing the story.

I have been asked why my thesis project starts with a decades old memory—*why are you focused on an incident that has long passed? Why don't you just move forward?* The charged energy from the moment of said memory stays with me. It is part of an ongoing conversation that is not unique to me. It touches the loss that is everywhere. I have realized the *When Nobody Was Here* project offers a piece of respite. The banner story and the video montage open spaces to consider life's fragments that connect to a larger pulse. *A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a container. A holder. A recipient.*³² This thesis project is both holder and recipient. For a while it will take up some space then release it like the printed fish on the banner, appearing, disappearing, being. Like the trees, a fact in seasons, a momentary grounding.

³² Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*:29



Figure 20, Shawn Grey, Special Projects Gallery banner installation, photo, 2022



Figure 21, Shawn Grey, Special Projects Gallery installation, photo, 2022



Figure 22, Shawn Grey, Special Projects Gallery, video montage image, 2022

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Appendix A: Collaborators



Christine Baigent, *Un-threading*: threads removed from fabric lengths, 2021.



William Baigent and Skye Paul, *Generational solar system*: twigs, stones, feathers, and leaf compositions solar developed images, 2022.



Fran Freeman, *Entwinement*: jun, beeswax varnish, nettle on fabric, 2022.



Neville Grey, *Carrying Place*: acrylic paint, yarn, image transfer text on pillowcase, 2022.



Shawn Grey, *Tree bark impressions*: pastel, fabric ink on fabric, 2021.

Appendix A: Collaborators



Carrienne Leung, Bat blessings: bats stitched on fabric, 2022.



Ingrid Mayrhofer, Critter collection: linocut prints on fabric, 2021.



Kelly McCray, History of York and High Park post card: image heat transfer on fabric, 2021.



Hitoko Okada, Fibre of the people: persimmon soaked fibre stitched on fabric, 2022.



Crystal Paul, Sister portrait on Maple seed pod: embroidery on net and fabric, 2022.

Appendix A: Collaborators



Denesee Paul, Fox: image heat transfer on organza, 2022.



Stephanie Pete, Nest home: ribbons, yarn, lace on fabric, 2022.



Bonnie Reid, Black Locust branchlet: appliqué on fabric, 2021.



Carol Schuster, Naming: fabric collage, ribbon, braid, and wood on fabric, 2021.



Sarah Loretta Schuster, Summer fishing story: linocut fish prints on fabric, 2022.