

EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS

JENNIFER TELLIER

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Abstract

You look at the work and ask “What is it about?”

I whisper “It’s a secret.”

You look confused. I add “Falling, time, history, place, identity, material, shadow, representation, and not knowing.”

You are pleased yet perplexed.

I won, though it isn’t obvious is it? I’ll explain then. “It’s about decolonization.”

Everything That Matters uses the trophy’s form as a subversive symbol to erode seemingly solidified colonial constructs. A field of trophy-like things, including papier-mâché sculptures, cement wreaths and granite cairns, invoke time, history, and epistemology not as ideas—but as materials. This exhibition is a gathering of fragments that confuse representations, rearranging and reforming them to create a space for alternative and complexing dialogues.

and it's all for you

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge
the people.

This paper is written on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Wendat, and Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nations. I am grateful to them, as well as other Indigenous nations who have called this place home, for sharing their stories with me in a spirit of peace, friendship, and mutual respect¹.

I acknowledge
the land.

My inheritance of, and occupation on, the places I call home are result of the violent and premeditated actions of colonialism. I call the lands, unjustly acquired in Treaty Six (1876), Treaty Seven (1877), and the Toronto Purchase (1787), my home.

I acknowledge
my colonial body, colonizing, and colonized.

What it was taught
What it remembers
Who it marginalizes
Who it speaks to
How it occupies
How it (cor)relates
Where it belongs
Where it (un?)settles

I acknowledge
my place.

¹ In recognition of Guswenta, the Two Row Wampum given to early Dutch colonists by the Haudenosaunee in agreement live in peace with one another without interference (Tehanetorens 74).

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On Supports

An excerpt from Jimmie Durham's poem:

The Center of the World
(The Direction of my Thought)
-Direct from my New Home in Eurasia-

On arrival all my words were already
(All ready [read]) arranged carefully.

I knew what I intended to say.
I had rehearsed well and knew
Rules of poetics and discursive
Still do; the longer I am away
The more memory can create.

(For example, when I hear your story
It sounds familiar, and the next day
I imagine I had happened in it.) (32)

This paper is written as a support to my thesis exhibition entitled *Everything That Matters*, showing in the Gales Gallery at York University, April 4-8, 2016. To support something is to bear the weight; a support structure is separate from that which it is supporting and yet it is integral to its being (erect). This paper bears the weight of the work in the exhibition without being the work. I have taken careful consideration not to support the work with itself; in other words, to minimally describe the work, and not justify it within the context of this paper.

Support structures hold things up to prevent them from approaching a state of falling. I don't think things are encouraged to fall, as falling is frequently and mistakenly associated with failure—an interruption of progress. Think about the ruins of past civilizations, think about the leftovers in all their pieces strewn about the ground. I consider falling a slow process of

communal returning, as everything that falls, falls down towards the same centre². Things that break apart after a fall can seldom be put back together in the same order to make the same whole. This paper is in support of the work before it falls, it is a redoing of that which has been undone, a certain complexing easing us closer to the unknown. The unknown is the work, obviously absent throughout the paper. The unknown is your visual language nestling close to mine. The unknown is the work without the paper as its support—encouraged to fall.

Let us imagine this paper as scaffolding holding up the work. With this structure in place we can walk around, under, and above the work. We can return to the same place again and again with more information and a different perspective. This scaffolding, unlike the structure of a paper, allows for a cyclical exploration as it suspends the work in a three-dimensional space. Decolonial thinker Walter Mignolo introduces his “spiral” writing method in the preface of his work, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, where he explains: “a linear argument cannot capture the nuances, since once a name or a paragraph is mentioned or quoted in a linear flow, it does not return: repetitions are not good in English composition but are important in decolonial thinking” (xxiii). Repetition allows the reader to consider the same text from a different perspective, like two pieces of wood leaning onto one another: “they reinforce each other” (Mignolo xxiii). This paper challenges linear progression, as it is not a series of compelling arguments or revelations which could dangerously conclude the work, rather it is composed of dialogues, love stories, poems, and thoughts—all bits of language pushed up against the work.

Let us also imagine that this scaffolding is not something apart from us, but it is us—our dialogue holds the pieces of stacked granite and built cedar structures, just as poured concrete

² I use “communal returning” in reference to the law of orbital decay: “a process that leads to gradual decrease of the distance between two orbiting bodies at their closest approach” (Orbital Decay). That is, everything that matters will eventually be pulled together, in this togetherness there will be no separate bodies of things. Just fragments.

holds my home, and a bouquet of flowers holds my love for you. I use dialogue for support, as it is dependent on two or more parts, one not only responding to the other, but in need of the other to persist. Conversation, both fictional and non-fictional, interrupt some of the pages, allowing for intimate, opposing, and, at times, risky perspectives. These interruptions carefully pull at knots tied by western constructs of knowledge. Settler-colonial Paulette Regan, author of *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*, writes of her own decolonizing experience: “my own deepest learning has always come when I was in unfamiliar territory culturally, intellectually, and emotionally. It seems to me this space of not knowing has the power that may hold the key to decolonization for settlers” (18).

I confuse pronouns throughout the paper in an effort to close the space left in the wake of binary colonial constructs of the Self and Other³. In this collapse, I, you, us, we, she, and he, are all at once the Self and Other. “We” statements are not meant to be universal, but rather statements that extend an invitation to the reader to put themselves into the story. In her book, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, Anishnaabekwe⁴ Leanne Simpson writes: “we are taught to insert ourselves into the story” (41). She is telling the Nishnaabeg creation story, beginning with the first human being, Gzhwe Mnidoo. Simpson tells the story once, and then twice, replacing Gzhwe Mnidoo with herself. By literally inserting herself into her creation story Simpson blurs where she ends and Gzhwe Mnidoo begins. This is also my intent, to blur what keeps us separate, to share my stories so they become your stories, just as you have done with me. In his book, *The Truth About Stories*, storyteller Thomas King gives each story in his book to his reader: “it’s yours,” he writes, “do with it what you will” (29, 60, 89, 119, 151). I don’t retell his

³ See Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, a comprehensive exploration of the West’s construction and depiction of it’s binary “Other”: the East or Orient.

⁴ I do not italicize *foreign* Anishinaabeg words in this paper. This language is integral, so it remains upright.

stories, or any other stories that are not mine. Instead, I tell the story of my experience as a listener. This way you keep your stories and I keep mine.

Everything that follows is purposefully

deviant

out of order

half-formed

fragmented

and perfectly knowable

Speak to Me in Flowers⁵

As if the whole flower were not enough
you pulled up the dirt around it too

Until the surface
is confused for what is
un
derneath

You will find this
in a pile of debris
in the near future

(This is ancient Greek for)
no column is hard
enough

(This is ancient Roman for)
no column is long
enough

Rose petals flattened
in the pages of Western
Civilization

I made a friendship
bracelet for you that remains
un finished
two strands

Something about the
emptiness of the place makes

it easy to take



Fig. 1. Tellier, Jennifer. *Dirt / Remains*.
2016. Digital Collage.

⁵ After Nayyirah Waheed's poem: *can we speak in flowers*.

Two rows of wampum
One for me and one for you

When we dig into
the ground there are bones and rocks
Mounds of dirt flattened⁶

I took all I could
and made it into my home

I want to __ with you
Anishinaabemowin
All over the place

She was bruised when a
rock from space
hit her body
in the living room⁷

I give you this place
wampum lakes trees in water
Welcome (in)to me

It's easy to think of fossils as rocks
It's hard to think of fossils as bones

I asked a psychic
“What does my future hold?” She
replied “Ashes and

stars Ashes and stars
Ashes and stars Ashes and
stars Ashes and stars”

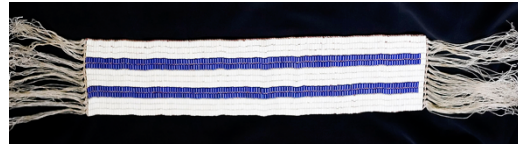


Fig. 2. Tellier, Jennifer. *Beads / Body*.
2016. Digital Collage.

⁶ After reading Leanne Simpson's poem, "jiibay or aandizooke," in her book *Stories & Songs: Islands of Decolonial Love*. After visiting cottage country in Northern Ontario for the first time.

⁷ Moody Jacobs is the only confirmed person in history to be struck by a meteorite.

In the beginning
there was plenty of water

for the both of us⁸

I slept with you for seven nights
You were always hard
like a rock
you were a piece of wood
65 million years old⁹

When I first saw a
bird of paradise
I pulled
it out
of the ground

There is not enough
Space in this place for you too
I said this to you

There is just enough
Space in this place for you too
You said this to me

I find it hard
to believe that nothing really
touches
It
falls
down

I want to lean my body against

something to better understand it
something is complete darkness
something is the same story over and over

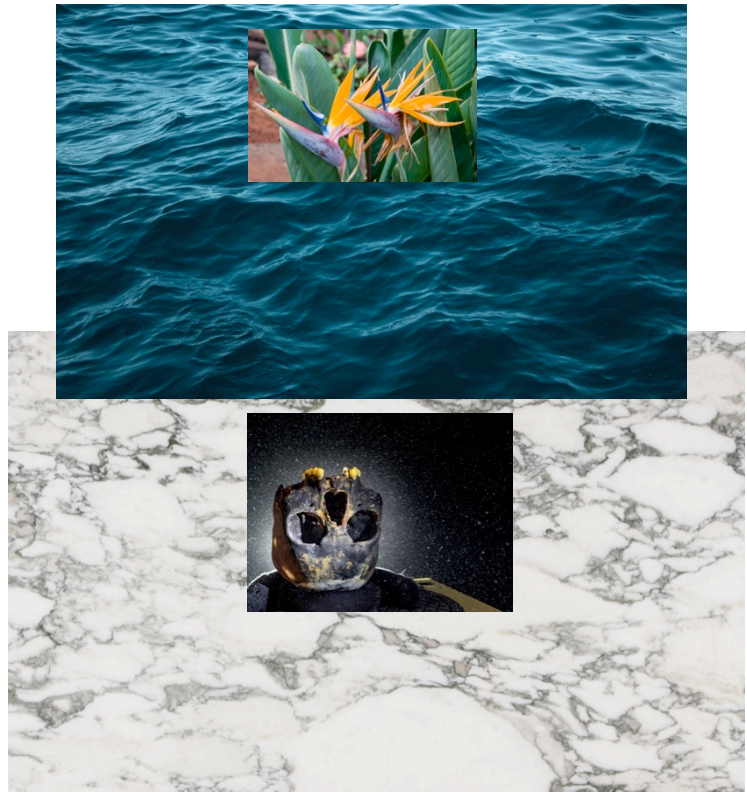


Fig. 3. Tellier, Jennifer. *Deep / Flower*.
2016. Digital Collage.

⁸ Creation stories of both Turtle Island and the Bible begin with the Earth covered in water.

⁹ I wanted to relate to a piece of petrified wood I had found, so I slept with it for seven nights.

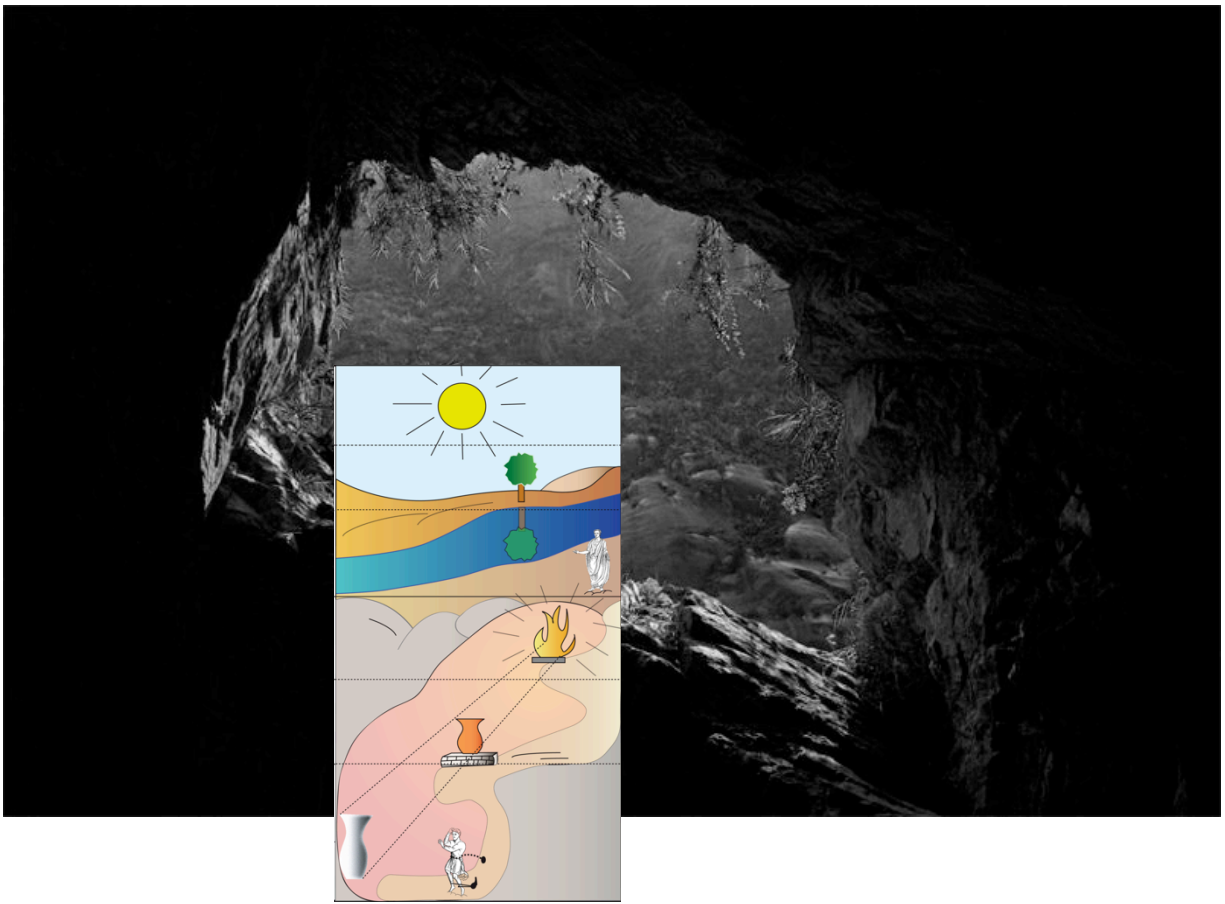


Fig. 4. Tellier, Jennifer. *Dark / Diagram*. 2016. Digital Col

We overhear a civilized conversation:

Plato and Aristotle are in a cave with a painting, and a painting, not a pot, is casting a shadow onto the wall from the fire (see fig. 4). Some of us have heard this one before, but this time keep in mind that the fire and the sun are both sources of light creating shadows, one outside the cave, and the other inside. Back to eavesdropping; you and I are outside the cave in the three-dimensional space surrounding the allegory—writing things down allows us to hover over the pages of a story, while stories told orally hover over us. A nearby somebody asks “How many dimensions are needed for something to be real?” We don’t know somebody.

In *The Republic*, Plato states that poetry and painting are imitations, illusions of mere appearances of things and as such mislead us “far from the truth” (433). In *Poetics*, Aristotle challenges Plato suggesting that art’s mimetic characteristics are empathetic and recognizable as they are “deep-rooted in the very nature of man” (57). It seems Plato does not trust the viewer in their ability to distinguish between “knowledge, ignorance, and representation” (426), whereas Aristotle does; believing that when we, the viewer, look at art we will say to ourselves: “oh, *that’s* what it is” (59 italics in original). It seems Aristotle trusts our ability to recognize art as a representation of something filtered through the artist’s perception of that thing. The viewer’s ability to recognize this illusion or representation brings us closer to, rather than further away from, the truth of that thing. Once again, Plato would argue that the further things are removed from the source, the greater difficulty we have recognizing the imitation, perhaps mistaking the representation for the thing itself.

Both Plato and Aristotle believe poetry and painting are representations of recognizable forms that exist outside the work, wistfully concluding that art is only representational; the shadow can not be parsed from the object or light that casts it. Let us go back to our cave; is it

possible to accurately perceive what is painted on the canvas from the shadow it casts? Of course not. Is it important for us to know what is painted on the canvas to appreciate the shadow? Possibly. We might ask “Why is a painting in a cave?” Maybe the painting is hiding, or it’s been left behind, it could have been thrown away or put there for safe keeping. Careful, we have started thinking about the painting as if it were a thing, a thing mimicking the original thing the artist painted; a thing not in the cave.

Sometime soon we stop listening to the conversation. Don’t think about the painting, think about the shadow. It’s so fleeting and dependent; everything is if you give it time.

We watch the bits of silver leaf flutter on the granite surface. Tell me if poetics cause the movement. Tell me the Artist is representing something. Tell me what it means. Tell me there is no place for civilized conversation in art¹⁰.

¹⁰ I’m aware of the convoluted absurdity in distinguishing what an imitation is and what it is not—not only what is being represented, but also how is it being made visible.

Everything that Matters

bouquets of flowers from my funeral
cement fragments
granite cairns
things obscured by papier-mâché
my breath held by balloons
rose petals flattened in the pages of western civilization
silver leaf between rocks
floral foam covered in cement
vases covered in papier-mâché
everything I feel when I'm with you
trophies for every winner
the meaning of art
the shape of my breath escaping a balloon
floral foam supporting marble
broken shells
silver chalices
cemented laurel wreaths
bouquets of flowers from the party
stones polished in a rock tumbler
stones polished in my mouth
things that are stolen
things I am in care of
dinosaur fossils from the cretaceous period
petrified wood from the river
black paintings of all the time
porcelain pressed into my hand
something to lay my body against
shadows of things that mean something
cedar palette to move
cedar stools to support
how you learned history
the weight of your body on top of mine
something you give me out of friendship
too many pinch pots
words we use to make sense

The above list reads like layers of rock, chronologically ordered then bent and twisted about in geological time. The list, like theory, is also speculation for how things can be perceived, ordered, and made sense of. Unlike stratified rock, this list was crafted by the Artist in minutes, hours and days; nothing about it is weighty, formed, or permanent. There is no definite order—chronological, hierarchical, or otherwise. Each thing can be placed next to some other thing on the list; (re)contextualizing it based on its proximity to other things. The Artist's actions interrupt geological time by removing a rock from one place and stacking it on top of a rock from another place. This isn't a method for making order,¹¹ this is an attempt at "total disorder" (Fanon 2).

On with the show. It's visible from the outside what you will see on the inside—not everything is this transparent. You walk into the gallery through a pair of glass doors and as you enter the space your body feels a vibration; this is the work speaking to you. The exhibition consists of a field of everything that matters (see list above) amassed on half of the gallery floor. These things are pushed up against an invisible line splitting the gallery in two on a diagonal. Standing at the door you wonder how you will navigate the exhibition as there does not seem to be enough room for your foot to step in the space without your hips brushing up against some sort of trophy-esque form. It is crowded in the beginning¹² and with difficulty you step over small stacks of rocks and rose petals.

I once built a cairn with you in the Himalayas, they said it would stand as a testament to our love; I wonder what it looks like now, if it's still standing when we're not. Imagine a cairn for every relation, I think it's excessive. We wonder if life like this manifests as "beatitude, or as

¹¹ Franz Fanon's entire quote reads, "decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder" (2).

¹² Like entropy.

an unspeakable, sheer violence” (Bennett 53). I think about every mark I’ve left in a place as something related to the “subtle forms of violence that permeate everyday Indigenous-settler relations” (Regan 10).

At this place she¹³ wrote in the margin, “occupation and loss.”

In among every thing that matters is a large papier-mâché column leaning precariously away from the wall. There is an inscription circling it that reads, “no column is long enough” and another “no column is hard enough.” We already know nothing is enough for a system like this. It is like the column in Rome; “Don’t look!” we shout¹⁴. There are other papier-mâché forms in this place— made similar with white gesso painted on their surfaces. They are leaning, supporting, and supportive toward one another. They are patterns connecting one form to another¹⁵. They are trophies as cups, cups as the monumental, trophy as the ruin, debris as art.

Remember when you walked into the Artist’s studio and your shoulder brushed up against the piece in progress and it fell to the ground? The Artist thinks about that moment a lot, about your body touching the work, and the work responding—by falling apart. As we crowd into the gallery a threshold will be reached; there isn’t space for both the work and our bodies to exist separately, eventually the two will collide.

In contrast to the field of things the other half of the gallery is sparse. A white marble table top is resting off the floor on floral foam bricks, it’s surface is covered with white porcelain pinch pots and shell-like forms of fossils pushed into the Artist’s hand. You see a spot of

¹³ Dr Ruth Koleszar-Green.

¹⁴ In 113 A.D. the Roman Emperor Trajan built a column in honor of the Dacian Wars. At the time it was forbidden for captured Dacians to look at the column, as it was for “Roman citizens, to show the power of the imperial machinery” (Curry). The column is visited by tourists today.

¹⁵ After historian Carl Schuster’s controversial work connecting patterns found in symbols from diverse cultures, periods and continents. See his book, *Patterns That Connect: Social Symbolism in Ancient & Tribal Art*.

darkness; two black oil paintings hang on a nearby wall. The paintings do not subscribe to an imperial sense of straight. Let us relate this to the part in the inner ear that keeps us from falling, tilting, swaying and bumping. As you move towards the paintings light reflects off the oil surfaces and you begin to make out text masquerading as texture. The paintings are titled, *The first thing I painted over the last two million years* and *More flowers over flowers and vases and flowers*. By your standards these paintings are not well hung, but let us remember that they do not have an inner ear, nor do they subscribe to our sense of (up)rightness.

The Artist wants you to feel uneasy and confused, close to what it might feel like if you were lost in a white landscape with nothing to orient yourself to. If only you could see the sun from inside the gallery, maybe then you could make out the horizon in the distance and be better suited to put everything that matters into perspective. Now we're thinking about the sun coming over the horizon, a pinky-peach hue filling the sky. I am beside you, touching every part of you and yet "no two spots really have the same relation to the sun" (Kubler 84).

You turn to face another wall. Shadows spill down this wall emanating from paper collages delicately suspended from small cedar beams high above you. Some shadows are long and distorted while others seem more true to their paper forms, yet all are recognizable as cut out photocopies of Greek amphoras, Indigenous Oceania sculptures and shells. The images on the paper are not the real object and neither is the photograph in the book from which the Artist photocopied these images from. The shadows are not shadows of Greek amphoras, Indigenous Oceania sculptures and shells—they just appear that way.

We're going to another place now; she cupped her hands filling them with water in order to take a drink. "Here," he said, passing her a shell. She took the shell from him, dipped it into the water and brought it to her mouth. Insert a great passage of time here. "I won," they cry as

they bring the trophy to their mouth in celebration. Champagne overflows from the edge of the cup past their mouth and onto their chest. They always win.

It's not over yet, as you leave you brush up against a small pile of granite rocks and the top rock falls to the floor. You look around worried and embarrassed. You pick up the rock and put it back on top of the pile, this time a little more certain, a little less risky. You cautiously make your way to the door. When you thought the work failed you took care of it. The Artist hoped for a moment like this. For the work to be in the care of someone other than herself.

We can start here.

It is my first ice-climbing trip; I am nestled up against the Albertan Rockies spending the day at Two O’Clock Creek, an icefall on the Kootenay Plains. The trail leading in meanders through a small forest, where I notice pieces of cloth wrapped around trees and small structures composed of branches clinging to the land. Carved into a nearby tree are the words “sacred ground”. I do not recognize this place.

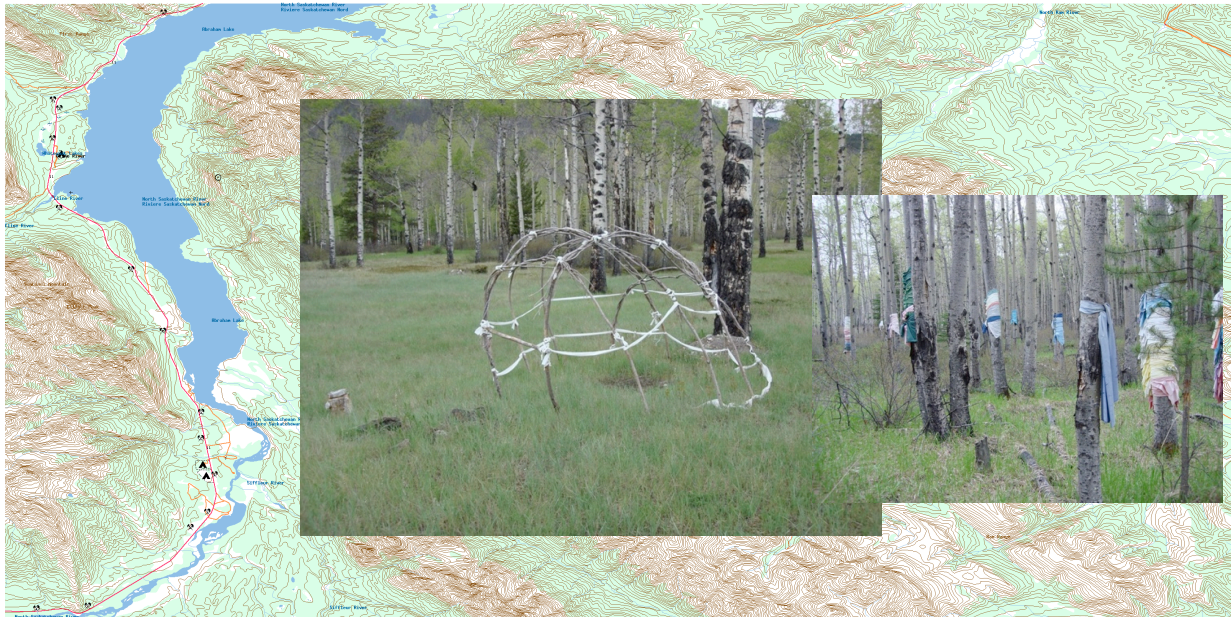


Fig. 5. Tellier, Jennifer. *Sacred / Ground*. 2016. Digital Collage.

From the beginning I was at home here. Here being the three-acre acreage my parents bought and built on in the early 1980s located west of Edmonton, Alberta. Here being the Rocky Mountains. Here being the North Saskatchewan and Red Deer Rivers. Here being Chickacoo Lake. Here being Muir Lake. Here being every place I went to. Here being the country I belong to, Canada. I was comfortable here and I was free, as I felt a sense of belonging to the places I

inhabited; a belonging of either I to them or them to me. Growing up I spent much of my time outside, canoeing on rivers, camping in the mountains, scrambling up summits, and dipping my body into cold lakes. I came to understand the world and my place in it through these experiences as they held a space for meaningful and formative conversations. Backpacking and canoe trips give distance in their remoteness; a two-week canoe trip away and apart from familiar places and people leads to shifts in perspective as well as deeper contemplation into intellectual, emotional and spiritual spaces. I have always yearned for this distance, and have come to appreciate unknown and remote places as a way to “greet [my]self arriving” (Walcott 328). All of my experiences in the outdoors, while at times challenging, continually affirmed my sense of belonging to this land.

What I saw on Kootenay Plains interrupted my understanding of history, land and identity. That day, in 2005, I walked through a Sundance site belonging to the Stoney First Nation. What I had once perceived as *my* land became a land filled with unknown histories and unheard stories. Unlike my previous experiences, this one made me uneasy as I was pushed into the margins—what was once familiar deteriorated into complex questions surrounding my identity and the Self that I had constructed in the places I call home. I am grateful for the presence of the Stoney on the land, what Anishinaabe cultural theorist Gerald Vizenor would call survivance. That is the “active presence” of “survival and resistance” that all First Nations, Metis, and Inuit within Canada embody as living beings in the midst of colonial oppression (15). The Kootenay Plains is a sticky place, as I come back to it often both in spirit and body.

I recently attended a performance workshop in Toronto lead by artist Armando Minjarez as a part of Progress Festival’s MONOMYTH series. Minjarez’s *Activist Workshop* asked each participant to critically engage with our own migrations in the wake of colonial forces. In a

personal exercise Minjarez instructed us to draw a river—this would be our river of life.

Beginning at our birth and leading into the present moment we were to chart along the river moments in our lives that were the direct result of colonialism. It was during the sharing portion of this exercise that myself and another white settler woman could see what our privilege looked like. Unlike our fellow groups mates, colonization was not a part of our lives until we chose to engage with it. For me it was when I was twenty years old on the Kootenay Plains, it was literally walking into an active place where cultural and spiritual values were (and continue to) resist colonialism (Smith 146). The presence of cloth, sticks and poles tripped me into decolonial thought. That sticky, sticky place.

Decolonization interrupts the page.

Do you recognize this word?

Do you know what it means?

How does this feel?

Comfortable?

Weighty?

Marginal?

Irrelevant?

Promising?

This feeling matters. It's possibly the only thing that matters.

Or we can start here.

I belong to a place where shadows are long in winter. I did not always notice this longness, as it's only after being away and then returning home that I have become aware of the elaborate distortion my shadow casts across the Albertan prairies. My shadow in my northern home of Stony Plain is different from my shadow in my more southern home of Toronto; even though the shape of my body stays the same, the form of my shadow changes. The shadow, however furtive and light, marks my presence in each of these places. This mark is continually altered by my positionality, that is my relationship to celestial and terrestrial bodies and things—which are continually continuing. I relate and understand the difference of the shadow as a way to acknowledge and recognize, both literally and metaphorically, the significance that place has on identity *formation*. My presence and occupation of place is one with meaning, consequence and responsibility¹⁶. The shadow is a culmination of self and place so much so that I hesitate to call it mine, and yet it is a direct result of my presence in place.

Shadows—like ourselves—are in constant flux, changing form as they continually relate to place. In their contribution to the anthology *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, Anti-Oppressive Approaches* (2005), Kathy Absolon and Cam Willet discuss the importance of the researcher to locate themselves, particularly within knowledge making spaces, thus ensuring an accountability for their own positionality (97). As an artist working towards an MFA at York University I am not only responsible for locating myself in relation to the physical¹⁷, but also to the spiritual and intellectual spaces I occupy.

¹⁶ See Dr Ruth Koleszar-Green's discussion of host/ Guest relationships in the chapter "What is a Guest?" in her dissertation *Understanding Your Education*.

¹⁷ See Acknowledgements for my acknowledgment of the physical land I occupy.

Long shadows allow things that are normally far away from each other—like the tips of trees and my knees—to touch. Or at least the shadow gives the illusion of touch, removing—if only in the absence of light—the space of separateness between things. As I step *into* the umbra, the darkest part of the shadow, my figure joins and casts not another shadow, but a new form of the same shadow. The edges that define my being and the tree’s being do not exist in the shadow. In this way, I think about the shadow as a space of inclusivity; that is, it flattens opaque things into radical spaces of acceptance.

Or here

“You’re my guest¹⁸,” she says—and I know from the story she told me over coffee that as her guest I stand at the door and introduce myself. This is the Entrance Song, an Onkewhonwe guest’s responsibility to “bare their stories and histories in order to show good intentions when entering into a community” (Koleszar-Green 177). So I begin, telling her who I am and what I am doing here.

I am white. I am woman. I am Canadian, born in Edmonton, Alberta on Treaty 6 land. The land I call home is the traditional territory of the Cree, Blackfoot, and Metis as well as the Nakoda, Tsuu T’ina, Chipewyan and other Indigenous Peoples. My patrilineal lineage comes from eleven generations of settlers on this land, first in Quebec in the early 1600s and then west into Northern Alberta towards the end of the 19th century. My matrilineal ancestry originates in England and is four generations deep.

¹⁸ A relational term used by Dr. Ruth Koleszar-Green to denote non-Indigenous people living on Turtle Island. I’m drawn to her use of the word “guest” instead of “settler-colonial” as it carries in it a relational quality, while also clearly claiming the land I call Canada, as Indigenous space.

I work with what I know, my self, my history, my stories and my experience—as they are the only things I can draw from and speak to with authority (Absolon and Willet 97). Settler-ally and academic Roger Epp clarifies in his book, *We Are All Treaty People*, why he seemingly writes about the Aboriginal as his subject; he answers: “my interest here lies in rethinking the relationship, so that instead of posing the question about reconciliation as a matter of what “they” want—recognition, compensation, land—and what “we” can live with, the subject under closest scrutiny becomes “ourselves.” In other words, the subject is not the “Indian problem” but the “settler problem” (126). My practice is not a place to tell stories that are not mine, or to recall a history I do not remember, or to take up more space and replicate colonizing attitudes and behaviours in my unlearning process (Regan 13). My practice recognizes and respects Indigenous practices and methodologies without appropriating them (Regan 15). My practice is a self-critique of my own decolonizing struggle.

I acknowledge the privileges and benefits the colonial system has afforded me and my ancestors at the expense of Indigenous people and their ancestors. I acknowledge my own need to decolonize, and as a colonial beneficiary I bear the “responsibility to address the inequalities and injustices from which I have profited” (Regan 47). I am wary of the space settler decolonization “has and potentially could claim” in addition to the “risks of becoming another colonizing discourse and aesthetic” (Decter, Taunton 32). I acknowledge my participation in decolonizing as one I willingly engage in, and that this statement alone is a privileged declaration, “whereas for many individuals of Indigenous ancestry it is part of a politics of *survivance*” (Decter, Taunton 39, Vizenor 15).

We feel uneasy. It is ok as “disturbing emotions are a critical pedagogical tool that can provoke decolonizing” (Regan 13).

I must remember to sing the Entrance Song every time.



Fig. 6. Tellier, Jennifer. *Pinky / Mars*. 2016. Digital Collage.

You have been here since the beginning of time, watching the pinky light of dawn come over the horizon. I set my alarm ten minutes before sunrise, so we can greet this day together. It is winter, I am cold, so I keep you close, nestled into the palm of my hand. I have been speaking to you for a few minutes now; we spoke in bed before we came down, and I say last things before I let you do the talking. I talk to you and you talk to the sun, that is how she told me it works.

During a visit to Dodem Kononsha, Cree and Metis Elder, Laureen Blu Waters, teaches me to greet the sun with tobacco first thing in the morning. She says this is the time to set

intentions for the day; in the liminal space of dawn things are not yet solid, they are still shifting, waking, and becoming. But, she warns, as soon as the sun comes over the horizon the course is set. As the sun's first rays reach through into the day I take care not to look, directly at least, as this light is blinding. Then I do it anyway. I look right at it, because I love looking at things I am not supposed to.

Photometry is the science concerned with measuring human sensitivity to light; it is understood that the eye's ability to register details—such as variations of colour and contrast, as well as distortions in perspective—decreases as the amount of light increases. That is, the brighter something is, the less we see. This concept is well known in photography, as light is the medium in which a photographer works. The camera is a mechanical device that records light onto a light sensitive surface such as film or a digital sensor. To create a perfect exposure, the photographer must control ISO, shutter speed, and aperture. I am most interested in aperture, as this is the opening in the lens that controls the *amount* of light coming into the camera.

The aperture acts much like the eye's pupil, opening up in low light conditions, and closing down in bright light. So, while it is commonly understood that too little light results in an underexposed photograph, the opposite is just as true—too much light results in an overexposure. However, how often is brightness associated with not being able to see? In his essay, *On Light as Midnight and Noon*, artist Paul Chan relates this phenomenon to art: “the eye is not a thoughtless hole that can be easily filled and flooded by the rush of luminous images. These will instead choke the light from entering the retina and reduce sensitivity to stimuli....The eye compensates by seeing less” (153). There is a threshold to the amount of light that can enter the eye, the lower the light, the more we see, as visual details “dissolve into a bright haze” (Chan 154). I seem to remember the light of dawn most clearly, as it is a pinky hue

that stains perhaps just the right amount of light to see everything most clearly. Paradoxically, the light at dawn is light without the presence of the sun, as it is just beyond the horizon, the moment before.

I paint all the trophies white and place them in a gallery with a dawn-like hue.

You see a spot of darkness; two black oil paintings hang on a nearby wall. When you see a black painting you are most likely seeing the mixture of many colours, various combinations of complementary colours such as red and green, blue and orange, or yellow and purple. In contrast, when we see darkness—not blackness—we are looking at the absence of light, thus the absence of any colour. Similarly, white light is the brightest light, and it is composed of all colours.

“This light does not illuminate things to see per se. It is instead a kind of light that transmits—in its lack—the very shape of things” (Chan 155).

Ironically, the colour pink is not one of these colours, as it does not exist on the light spectrum. So, how is it we are able to see something that scientifically does not exist?

This page does not belong. (Just throw it out)

The Fall

The ideas ruins evoke in me are grand. Everything comes from nothing, everything perishes, everything passes, only the world remains, only time endures. How old is this world!...What is my ephemeral existence in comparison with that of a rock being worn down, of a valley being formed, of a forest that's dying, of these deteriorating masses suspended above my head? (Diderot 22)

What follows are pieces of text strewn about the ground. Pick them up in any order, make sense of them however you like. You should have more than one thing in mind, use one as a metaphor for the other. This is closely related to how the work functions in the gallery.

So much of the work is almost falling. I want to catch the work before it falls. I want to support it as it tilts and sways under worn foundations. I want to let it rest against my body, as if I could be as significant and lasting as this stone.

The gallery is in ruin. Five nights are going to pass, five rotations of the Earth. The work will shift closer to the middle in an expedited rate of decay. It will tip towards a centre that keeps shifting—remember Aristotle and Ptolemy? They both believed that “the Earth stood at the centre” of the universe, and everyone believed them for 1800 years (Hawking 2-3). Centres shift slowly, as no one likes being cast out to the margins.

On Monday the sculptures are tall, balloons erect, trophies full. The moment before. On Friday most of it has fallen, deflated, and emptied. This is the moment after. To you it feels like a great

amount of time is passing, five millennia? Or is it five epochs? Or, five eons? There is a sense of confusion surrounding the order of moments, as even now we are recollecting the future.

EON>ERA>EPOCH>AGE>MILLENNIUM>CENTURY>DECADE>YEAR>MONTH>DAY>HOUR>MINUTE>SECOND

You were in my studio and your body brushed up against a work in progress. It fell. It fell apart, quickly returning to the detritus it was before. Imagine if our bodies could graze the columns in Rome and they too would come falling down. Ruins brought to ruin. Perhaps you'll be the one to topple the column this time.

There is a granite sculpture being carved on the north-east corner of campus, this is where the Artist gathers the speckled pieces of granite. The pieces she picks up have been cast aside, as they are unneeded negative space that has been removed.

“Hail, solidarity ruins! holy sepulchres and silent walls! you I invoke; to you I address my prayer” (Comte de Volney 12). Volney speaks *to* the ruin, not *of* the ruin. By addressing the ruin directly he acknowledges its ability to outlast him, recognizing in it an immortal, god-like quality. Ruins are exerting their existence over eons, this lastingness is made possible by the very nature of the materials they are built of: rocks, minerals, clay, concrete, all existing in a span of time incomprehensible to us. How can we comprehend the difference between 10 million and 100 million years when we live in stretches of time measured, at most, in decades? He said, “your lifetime is an eternity.” And I believed him. Because I loved him.

“A world compartmentalized, Manichaeian and petrified, a world of statues...a world cocksure of itself, crushing with its stoniness the backbones of those scarred by the whip” (Fanon 15).

She presses into the clay; it takes easily to her hand—her hand against the clay, the clay against the shell. It is a malleable “formless mass” in this state; from here clay often takes on the form of other things (Cooper 13). Is that not what they think of art?

“Everything made now is either a replica or a variant of something made a little time ago and so on back without break to the first morning of human time” (Kubler 2).

The shadow is relational as its form is equally determined by the shape of the object being cast, the shape and material the shadow is cast on, as well as the quality of light, as a shadow can only exist in specific lighting conditions. The shadow is dependant and distorted by what it comes up against.

In the search for a primal object he starts accumulating things; the Artist starts by working with too much, unable to stop the accumulation. Like Lucy Lippard as she researched her book, *Overlay*, coupling contemporary art with the art of prehistory, he too finds it “impossible to limit [him]self” as one can keep going “still further back” (3). Going back to the beginning, “taking any route, starting from anywhere” quickly leads us out of our local, into wider and wider circles of proximity, until at “the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time” (Eliot 139, 145).

“Vital materiality can never really be thrown “away,” for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity” (Bennett 6).

Arriving back to where one starts reminds me of Italo Calvino’s character, Qfwfq, in the short story, *A Sign in Space*. At a point in time Qfwfq draws a sign in space, “just so [he] can find it again two hundred million years later...the next time around” (32). But during the two hundred million years Qfwfq begins forgetting the mark he drew to mark his place, he recalls: “I realized that, though I recalled its general outline, its overall appearance, still something about it eluded me, I mean if I tried to break it down into its various elements, I couldn’t remember whether, between one part and the other, it went like this or like that” (35). I imagine it is just as hard to trace a shadow’s outline in the flickering light of the fire. Or to know what is obscured under all that papier-mâché.

The Artist assembled a diagram in an attempt to trace back the original form of the trophy.

“When we consider the class of these great moments, we are usually confronted with dead stars. Even their light has ceased to reach us. We know of their existence only indirectly, by their perturbations, and by the immense detritus stuff left in their paths” (Kubler 40).

“The figures and shapes described by the history of things are moreover so distinctive that one asks whether artifacts do not progress a specific sort of duration, occupying time differently for the animal beings of biology and the natural materials of physics” (Kubler 83).



Fig. 7. Tellier, Jennifer. *Primal / Trophy*. 2016. Digital Collage.

Fossils Greeting Fossils

A poem by Jane Hirshfield:

These Also Once under Moonlight

A snake
with two small hind-limbs
and pelvic girdle.

Large-headed dinosaurs
hunting in packs like dogs.
Others whose scaly plates
thistle to feathers.

Mammals sleekening, ottering,
simplified
back toward the waters.

Ours, too, a transitional species,
chimerical, passing,
what is later, always, called monstrous—
no longer one thing, not yet another.

Fossils greeting fossils,
fearful, hopeful.
Walking, sleeping, waking, wanting to live.
Nuzzling our young, wildly, as they did. (17)



Fig. 8. Tellier, Jennifer. *Bend / Break*.
2016. Digital Collage.

On Surfacing

When I was 11 years old, I found a handful of dinosaur fossils on the bank of the Red Deer River, in the badlands of Alberta. I carefully preserved each fossil by wrapping it in a swath of paper towel, held together by tape and then sealed into a plastic sandwich bag. Looking back, I am fascinated by my interest to preserve, as well as my method of preservation. The paper towel, tape, and plastic bag were all materials used in an effort to pause the effects of time on these fossils. Coincidentally, by physically removing the fossils from where I found them I also disrupted the geological processes that caused the bones to fossilize in the first place. How easy

it would have been to leave the bones where I had found them, letting them take their natural course, down into the Red Deer River; instead I chose to take them home.

I recently brought one of these fossils to the Royal Ontario Museum's rock and fossil identification clinic. They confirmed that I am in care of a dinosaur rib bone from the cretaceous period, dating 70-75 million years ago. I was asked where I had found the bone fragment, as a fossil can only be properly identified if the place in which it was found is known. Philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin reflects on the importance of location as it relates to excavation and memory as he writes:

The man who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where in today's ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of his richest prize. In this sense, for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them (576).

Fragments—whether bones, cloth or rocks—can only be understood in context if the place from which they come from is known. Land is always the richest prize.

Fossils come to the surface and stay on the surface—but for a very short time, just as we, human beings, are on the surface of the Earth for at most a century. I came upon my small fossil collection by paying close attention to what was on the surface. According to Alberta's Historical Resources Act there are two methods for collecting fossils: firstly, surface collecting, the gathering of isolated fossils that are clearly on the surface of the ground, and secondly, excavation or digging, which means to dislodge in any manner the fossils imbedded or buried in the ground. As an amateur fossil collector, I can legally only take what I find on the surface. I must wait for the fossil to become visible, and then act quickly before it makes its way back into

the earth. If the fossil is in any way covered, it is illegal for me to remove it, as an excavation permit is required, which is only available to palaeontologists. I must resist the urge to dig.

Not everything makes its way to the surface, yet it is only the things on the surface which are visible and become known. I metaphorically relate the way fossils come to the surface to my own decolonial process of learning and unlearning. It seems rather serendipitous that the short amount of time a fossil sits on the surface also coincides with my presence in the same place. In this way, my occupation of a place—along with other people, animals, and things of past, present, and future—is consequential, as knowledge is dependent not only on things coming to the surface, but also what is noticed there. Similarly, dispossession from a place renders certain knowledge unknowable or temporarily invisible; that is, not all things on the surface are picked up. In his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon writes: “the colonizer makes history and he knows it” (15). The power to make history comes not only from deciding what to pick up, but also from occupying so many places and spaces where countless things are strewn about the ground. Land is the richest prize.

I do not own my fossil collection; the Historical Resources Act also states that ownership of found fossils remain with the Province of Alberta. I hold onto my fossils as a custodian, a temporary caretaker, and as such I am not to remove fossils from the province or sell them without obtaining permission. There is some tricky metaphoric residue here. Decolonization can be like that. There are rules to owning things of value; only certain people can be in care of something as rich as land. If land is always the richest prize, it looks like I have won, but looks can be deceiving. Remember when we passed by the debris on the ground and did not call it art. Look at it now.

Colonization relies on things that matter; decolonization relies on everything mattering.

What follows is an incomplete list of things that sit on the surface close to my home in Alberta: dinosaur fossils, my house (not the foundation), all my things, my family, roads, medicine wheels, mountains, abandoned movie sets, ripple rocks from ancient sea beds, barbwire fences, trees, campsites, my first car, household garbage, the fifth wheel, wine bottles, trampolines, sage bushes, the bodies of decomposing deer on the side of the highway, and your cremated ashes as you wait for the one you love. History is the accumulation of time allowing all of these things to sit on the surface together.

I resisted the urge to dig before, I shamelessly dig now, as “he who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil” (Benjamin 576). Land is the richest prize.

On Accumulation

History is not a linear progression of events with one thing ending as another begins, although this is the way I have always imagined it. History is everything continually happening all at once. To better orient ourselves in time we use markers, things that seemly set apart one event from another, like the bouquet of flowers we gave you on your birthday.

Although there is only one past, one set of events that have happened, our knowledge of these events do not come to us in chronological order. This can be attributed to the relationship between power and knowledge, a pillar of colonialism. We must therefore be cognizant and vigilant not only in what stories in history are being told to us, but also when they come to us; that is, the order, in relation to our own lives, these stories are heard. In a linear understanding of history, we place events on a timeline in chronological order, and there are many beginnings, a

middles, and ends. As we learn and accumulate more knowledge, we insert new stories in the timeline—leaning the recent unknown next up against the already known. In this way the timeline is continually elongating, making space for the new to sit next to the known. Sometimes new knowledge does not just lean into previous constructs, but also topples them. History is not only a process of addition—learning—but also of subtraction—relearning and unlearning—to account for false¹⁹, erased and untold histories.

On Mud

I do not always know where stories begin, as they often surface in a disordered, unstructured, and non-linear manner. As a result, some parts get told again, and that is okay, as “hearing the same story makes it impossible to forget” (hooks [stet] 3). Conversely, it is not okay, as some stories do not get told at all. I find fragments of things on the surface, things that fit between my fingers and into my pockets—smaller and smaller things belonging to larger and larger stories. Fragments are things that have been broken apart and separated from a greater whole. Fossils are pieces of bone once belonging to a whole skeleton, and what was once a body, a whole living thing, can only be known through the dense, hard parts that last. It is around these fragments that we build up fictions, working backward, to remake history.

Do we know what the body of the dinosaur looks like based on this small piece of rib? No, of course not. Right about now, you start thinking about creation stories, as these are the stories we pass down to attach meaning to our presence in place. “Now, this is a good place to begin,” and just when you thought you had a bearing I start all over again. I get you thinking about the surface in creation stories, together we recall the mud gathered from the ground to

¹⁹ Ptolemy again!

make Adam, and then the rib pulled from Adam’s side to make Eve. You tell me about the Turtle that caught Sky Woman as she fell from the cosmos to a watery Earth, and the small piece of mud that floated up in the muskrat’s little claw²⁰ that expanded to make North America, yes—this is Turtle Island. The surfaces in these creation stories act as support to our being.

I push into clay to create small spaces for contemplation.

On Progress

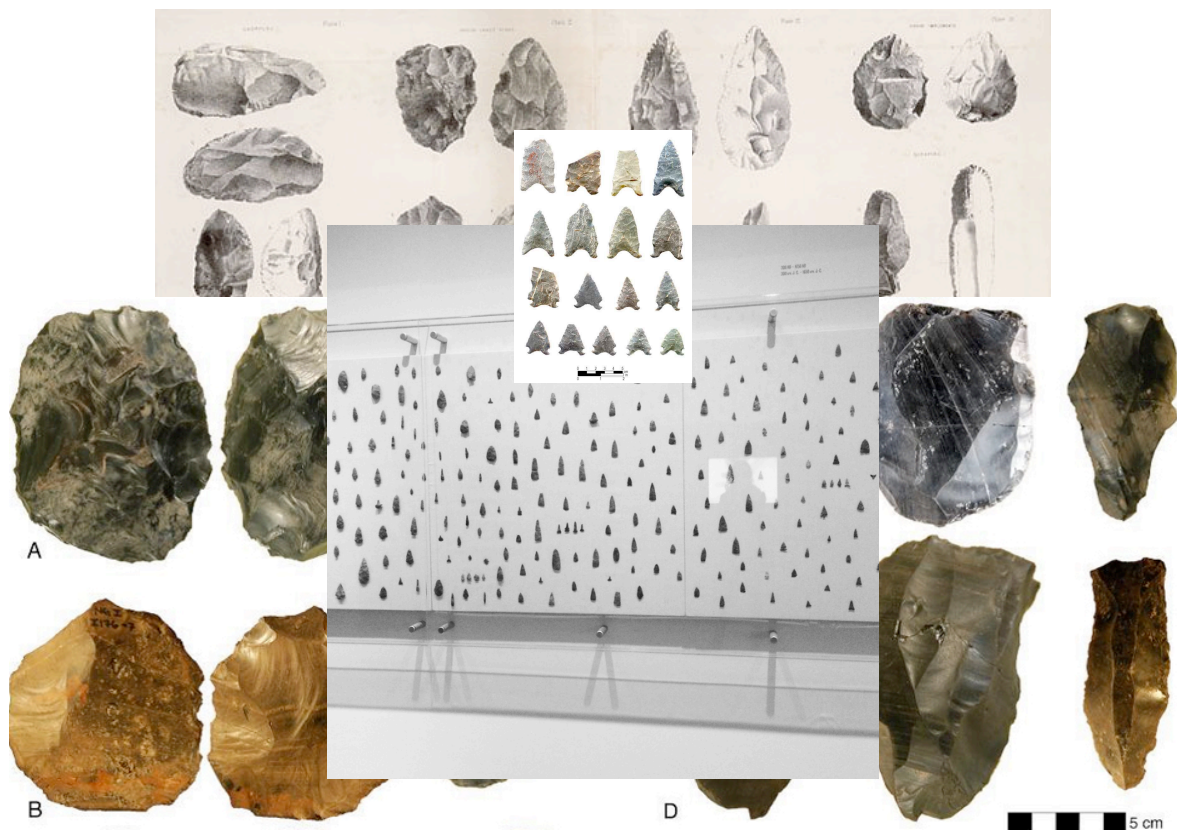


Fig. 9. Tellier, Jennifer. *Point / Perspective*. 2016. Digital Collage.

From down the corridor I see a constellation of pointy rocks, they appear insignificant from here. Distance does that, making things that are far away appear small in comparison to

²⁰ I could have misheard “claw” instead of “jaw.” She corrects

things that are near. Distance also distorts perspective, as the points seem flattened and elongated when I know they are not. As I bring myself closer, and then further away from the points, I pay attention to the various changes in form constructed by my changing proximity to them. I wonder, is looking back at history is like this? Do I have to stand near it to better see it for what it is? Remember that time we talked about time travel?

I'm at the Art Gallery of Ontario looking at hundreds of projectile points mounted to linen. The points are arranged in chronological order, and span over 11,000 years. I find myself continually drawn back to this display, arrested by the simplicity of form and the consistent shape of the point through time. I bring you here to ask you what you think—as your mind is suited to the stars. We stand in front of the points and you comment on the evident lack of evolution. You are disappointed to see that so little progress has been made over such a vast period of time. I had never thought of it like that. Sometimes you say the saddest things; Science can be like that.

From down the corridor the points cannot see me, but I can see them—pointy little rock shards once poking out of the ground. Someone bent down to pick each one of these out of the earth.

A Thousand Times in My Language

An excerpt from the poem she titles: *Progress fears failure*:

Failure is a flower, the seed is knowledge (Maracle np).

I am sitting in Dodem Kanonsha, with Traditional Ojibway knowledge keeper Amy Desjarlais. I have come to the Dodem, a space in Toronto dedicated to educating both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Indigenous ways of knowing, to talk through my decolonizing journey. I have been to the Dodem before, but this is my first time meeting Amy. During our one-on-one session, Amy asks about my art practice, and I begin telling her about the materials I have been collecting to make the work: mostly rocks and debris that I shape into trophy like forms.

She further inquires about the rocks I gather and I tell her “I’ve always collected rocks, as I’m constantly looking down, waiting “to be surprised by what [I] see,” and when something catches my eye, I pick it up (Bennett 5). It’s an action I don’t question, as it seems so integral to my being. As a result, I have piles of rocks and small found things everywhere: my bathroom, desk, bedside table, window sill, and bookshelf. I noticed that I collect as a way to familiarize with a place. It’s only recently that I’ve let these piles of rocks cross into my art practice, and I’m using them in a way where I let the rocks be rocks. I don’t alter them in any way; I simply change their position in relation to other things. I withhold changing the rock’s form as I trust it. But, recently, I’ve become quite critical of my work. I walked into the studio the other day and all I saw were stacked rocks, and I thought “have all I done is stack rocks for the past two years?”

I continue “This was a heart wrenching moment for me; it was as if everything I thought the work was, it wasn’t.” All the materials I had collected suddenly became flat, and this

flattening rendered them meaningless. The granite I had collected was not speaking through its raw edges, the pink insulation foam was ugly, the cedar wood supports were excessive, and all of it meant nothing. Amy consoled me in my dangerously flattened world: she began telling me about rocks “Did you know they are our grandfathers? We call them that because they are the oldest thing here.” I did not. “They will speak for you.” I trust her.

In her book, *Vibrant Matter*, new-materialist Jane Bennett discusses the active role non-human materials play in our world. Borrowing from Spinoza, Bennett describes this object related agency as “thing-power,” that is, each thing has an ability to “persevere...its own being” (2). Bennett becomes aware of “thing-power” during an everyday encounter with debris laying over a storm drain; on one hand, she writes, it is “stuff to ignore,” while on the other the “stuff commanded attention in its own right” (4). Debris calls out to us, “even though we may not understand what it [is] saying” (Bennett 4). I pick up the rock. Anishinaabeg concepts of materiality and spirit resonate closely with new-materialist theories: “for the idea that agency is located not solely in human beings but is also distributed across material, human, and animal realms, is fundamental to traditional Anishinaabe thought” (Phillips 52-53). And listen.

Further on, Bennett challenges what constitutes a thing by picking apart our own body’s composition of “various material parts (the minerality of our bones, or the metal of our blood, or the electricity of our neurons)” and characterizing them as “lively and self-organizing” (10). She looks back through evolutionary time, tracing the mineralization of our bones, some 500 million years ago, to our ability to “conquer every available niche in the air, in water, and on land” (Bennett 11). Bones keep us upright. In this way, vibrant matter is not something apart from our human bodies, it is our bodies. Mineralization is the tiny structures in my hand picking up your rib bone, some 75 million years later.

Holding It Together: A List of Supports

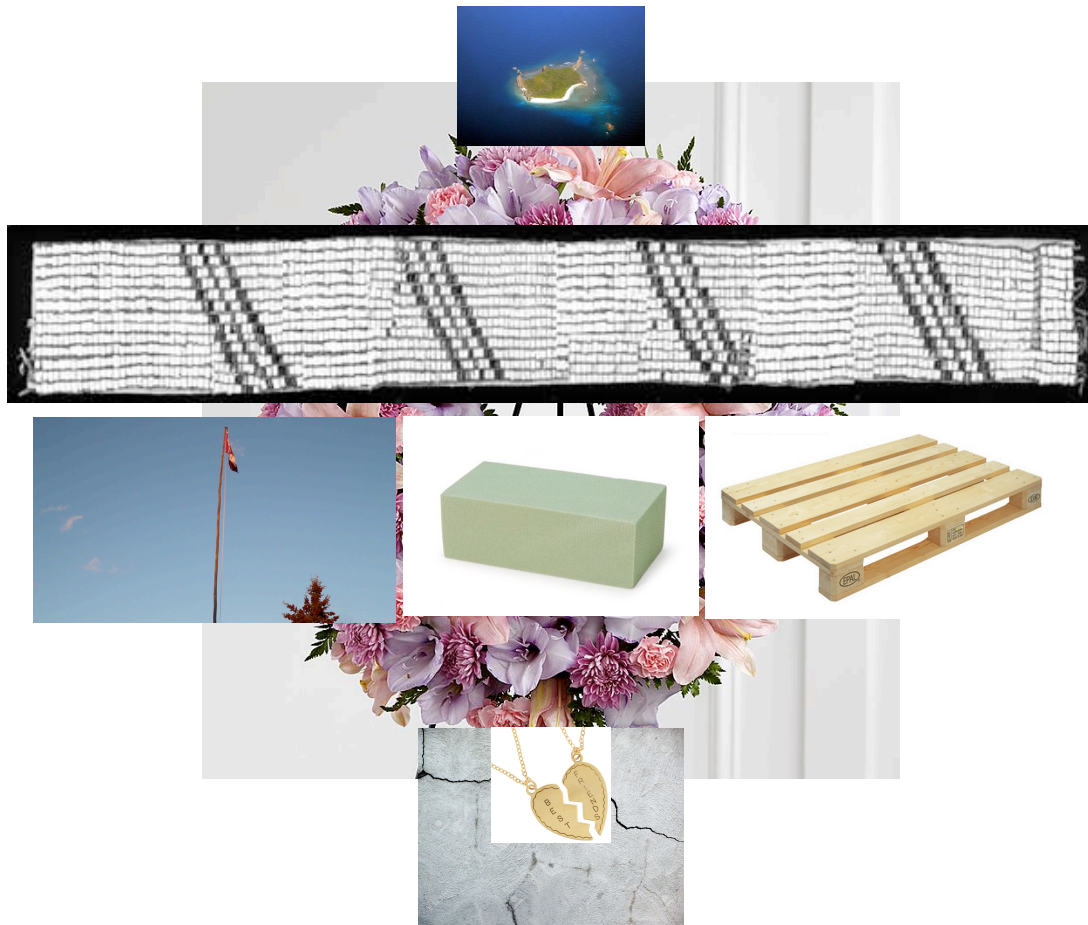


Fig. 10. Tellier, Jennifer. *Carry / On*. 2016. Digital Collage.

1. **Flowers.** You were carrying a bouquet of flowers wrapped in paper. I wondered if you were celebrating, or if you were mourning; I can never tell. Flowers are odd like that, showing up at any occasion. They are markers for something significant, something that has happened or about to happen.
2. **Shipping Pallet.** I stole the pallet from a construction site near my home, as there was a stack of at least 20 or even 30 of them, I didn't think taking one would matter. When I

brought the pallet into the wood shop, he explained to me that I was in possession of an international pallet. This is a design that uses a minimal amount of wood. He also pointed out a stamp which had been burned into the wood; this told him the pallet was made in Europe and the wood was free from disease. This pallet can cross invisible borders that other diseased wood cannot. I copied the design from the stolen pallet and built my own out of cedar. My pallet supports fossils that have been removed from Alberta: imagine when these dinosaur bones are found next to the dried up chasms of the Great Lakes. By then, it will not matter.

3. **Land.** The foundation of the house I call home is dug into Treaty 6 land. The soil had to make room for us to belong in this place. The soil and the people. This is the shape of my belonging.
4. **Wampum. The Coming of The People with White Faces—A Record Belt.** In his book, *Wampum Belts of the Iroquois*, Tehanetorens describes the wampum belt that serves as a record for the arrival of early settlers on Haudenosaunee land. Visually, the belt is comprised of mostly white wampum beads with three small purple diagonal lines intersecting the belt four times: “The thin, weak inside line represents the early whites. The Indians supported these early whites, holding them up so that they would not fall down, that is, showing them how to hunt, to farm, and teaching them how to survive and live in this country until they were strong enough to support themselves” (70).
5. **Pinch Pots.** She is making containers that hold space. There are 10 000 pinch pots and one of them has your name on it.
6. **Creation stories.** Yes, I have heard of Sky Woman falling. But please, tell me again, as my creation story comes from the rib. “She fell from Sky World all the way to a watery

Earth. The birds broke her fall and she landed on the turtle's back. The turtle supported her until she could make more land out of mud." This makes me think of the asteroid that bruised that woman sitting in her living room²¹.

7. **Best Friends Forever.** It was when she²² wrote "I have always been here," that I knew that no amount of generations settling on this land could ever amount to "always." When we look into each other's eyes, he says it must be mutual. The gaze: you into me, and me into you. This makes us unrepresentable (Mirzoeff 1).
8. **String.** There was a plant in the corner of the office visible through the glass wall. A cactus, no—two cacti, in one pot. Two cacti in one pot held together by a thin string so neither would bend too far over. It was the string, not the cacti, keeping one in care of the other. I wonder about the possibility of the plant existing without the string: the string's holding keeps those plants alive.
9. **Cement.** Would you believe it if I told you the recipe for cement was lost for thousands of years? That's what she said.
10. **Floral Foam.** They began arranging flowers for his funeral. They inserted each flower stem by stem into the green floral foam. How many holes can the foam take until it begins breaking apart? How many flowers can it support? How much water can it hold to keep all these flowers alive?

By looking at the arrangement you would have thought the foam to be in a thousand pieces, crumbs even. So many flowers, and they are all for you.

²¹ Moody Jacobs is the only confirmed person in history to be struck by a meteorite. The photograph (see fig. 2) shows the bruise the rock left on her body in 1954.

²² Back to a drawing collaboration with Brittney Bear Hat for our exhibition titled, *That's What She Said*, shown at TRUCK Gallery in Calgary in 2013.

She asked me what was stolen. “I think it’s important to know” she said. So I began with the closest thing and made my way out.

Art relies on time to fail it.

The Beginning

A poem by Jimmie Durham:

(Not the Point)

In the beginning, or perhaps
Close to when something began,
There were probably only
Three or four or five
Things.

Possibly two or three or four of
Those were only words,
But words too heavy to remain in
Place.

We don't know
Who said what
First

+>^^)!!!:(?)=///<<</?

(It the world watching) (63)

We are told about beginnings, but not always at the beginning.

He said, “the beginning is the most important part of the work” (Plato 131).

He responded, “let us discuss all this, beginning in the natural way with first things” (Aristotle 45).

“History cuts anywhere with equal ease, and a good story can begin anywhere the teller chooses” (Kubler 2).

I am fascinated by beginnings, by the words we choose to start stories— a dialogue, a scene, a thought, a shape, a colour, a mark, a gesture. At times we get to choose beginnings, cognizant of the first thing in relation to how others will follow. At other times we don't get to choose, recognizing that the first things are not first things at all, they are closer to the middle.

It's difficult to orient oneself to the beginning, as it keeps dissolving the closer we come to calling it the first thing. So, we just say something about turtles all the way down (King 1, Hawking 1).

If I know where the End is, which I do not, I could tell you where we now find ourselves. The Beginning, then, becomes the only place from which we can orient ourselves. The Beginning, then, becomes the only place to which we can orient ourselves; at least for those that remember the Beginning long enough to pass it on.

This is the beginning.

My beginning is formless, empty and dark (Gen. 2.5-8).

My beginning is darkness and emptiness (*Dancing* Simpson 37).

No place for art.

I want to know about your beginning.

“Do I dare disturb the universe?” (Eliot 4-5)

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