

Eco-Access? Investigating archival documentation for presence and radical re-definitions of
access, inclusivity, and disability representation.

by

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Abstract

My research is focused on analyzing archival documents to highlight inclusive language and themes of disability representation. Access in this analysis is seen on a sliding scale, as nature and the natural world, when analyzed through the lens accessibility is not simply a binary with the urban. Approaching the research, I reflected on and used a critical disability-oriented lens, with a specific focus on eco-crip theory to better understand access and inclusion of disability in urban natural spaces. I am interested in how the perception of access to nature affects the dialogue surrounding representation, and as a by-product, the experience individuals with physical disabilities may have in wilderness and nature. Experience in this context is posited on, first, the representation in the environment and second, the movement and act of accessing or moving through the space. For this research, I chose to investigate archival content documenting the Leslie Street Spit, a unique urban area in Toronto, Ontario. My archival investigation involved highlighting and interpreting the key themes of access, disability, and nature, using the Spit as an example, to find representation and presence of individuals with physical disabilities. Through the research, I discuss and argue that access and inclusion ought to be interpreted on a sliding scale, particularly when attempting to integrate these themes into discussions of nature and the environment. With this in place, the use of language and representation can lead to creating more inclusive spaces in the outdoors, both physically and theoretically. I suggest an increasing need to acknowledge and promote the presence of a diverse range of beings in nature and adjust the current assumptions of access and inclusion that tend to exclude disability.

Foreword

In my research, I have reflected on the nature of the term interdisciplinary within academia. I began the program interested in learning and understanding the nuances of environmental and ecological education. During this two-year program, inspired by previous academic and research-based experiences, I was intrigued by the potential to analyze disability and ableism in the environmental sphere. The MES program has allowed me to investigate the nuances and complexities of these topics and understand how disability continues to be excluded in various conversations and dialogues related to environmentalism and the natural world. Situated within my Plan of Study, I have approached the research by investigating access and inclusion and arguing that there is a need to analyze these phenomena in new ways. Related to this, is the desire to highlight disability as a central presence, a core identity represented in nature, and to understand it as providing a role and place in nature and outdoor experience. Investigating the literature on eco-crip theory, the first academically defined theoretical analysis of disability studies and environmental social sciences has allowed me to immerse myself in two fields in which I am deeply passionate. I have devoted this paper and program to gaining a more profound perspective of how the narratives of critical disability theories are interwoven in the environmental social sciences and education. In addition, my paper meets the requirements of the learning objectives indicated in my Plan of Study. Learning about barriers and structural inequalities pertaining to disability and social inclusion in environmental education and critical disability narratives constitute part of these goals. The MES program as a whole has helped me understand more thoroughly the interrelationships between disability, hegemony, nature-society interactions, and radical and informal approaches to environmental education. Furthermore, the course of study has enabled me to recognize concepts of social and political ecology and how they relate to disability oppression.

Dedication

I believe that the notion of dedication is too broad to be limited to one specific entity. Thus, I dedicate the work instead to my future works, future thoughts, and the future spaces I hope to be a part of. I devote my research paper and work to the future, as a reminder to myself that the work is never truly done. There is unlimited potential to learn, to grow. The dedication is thus a continued commitment to learn, seek out knowledge, imagine and dream.

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“From landfill to an urban oasis, the park has a Spit personality: It’s a *paradox*: a secluded spot in the heart of the city, a natural area and yet one of its most unnatural as well.”
(Box 401287 Folio 9)

Introduction

Disability is often perceived as a “dirty” word. One we shy away from, one that people tend to become sombre at the mention of. As a society, disability is often discerned through alterity, perceiving it as a deficit, a lacking “ability” or “ableness”. I’ve recently pondered on the consequences of a huge societal transition via the lens of disability, and the consequences a transition could mean for broader society. There has been an important push toward inclusion and accessibility in many sectors, such as education, arts, and transportation, because historically, alterity in many forms, alongside ability (race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status), has pushed individuals and their experiences of the world to the margins. I want to stress and recognize that there has been tremendous progress in inclusivity, language, and the representation of disability that has been incorporated into society to date, and I do not aim to discount this. However, as collective, and intersectional movements remind us, there continues to remain space and the need for more. Recognition is critical, as change or a secure establishment of a norm in society, from social justice movements to environmental advocacy, is not always a smooth and consistent journey. My introduction to investigating access from a research-based setting was a research project I was privileged enough to work on before beginning my MES degree. Working with Carleton University, and the Research Education Accessibility and Design (READ) program, I investigated the experience of work and career transitions for individuals with disabilities in the Federal Public Service. The project drastically opened my eyes, first, to the lived experiences faced by individuals with disabilities in professional settings, and second to how governmental organizations and large-scale professional infrastructure, is often very

unsupportive and inaccessible space. As a result, I became interested in addressing and analyzing disability in other sectors, and the MES degree and faculty of Urban and Environmental Change at York University provided me with the flexibility, space, and structure to do this intersectional work.

Access is such a small, simple word, yet holds a plethora of capacity, and potential. As a student, I have had ample *access* to literature, and have had the opportunity to learn and grow because of my *access* to education. Access can be seen as a core pillar of society, our daily lives are dependent on who, what, and where we have access to. In the simplest of definitions, access can be a form of *power, opportunity, and choice*. When beginning the process of developing my research interests and where they aligned, I revisited the concept of access and spent some time muddling over it. Sitting from a place of privilege, a white, cis-presenting, able-bodied, neurodivergent, woman, I also recognize that my perspective remains closer to the status quo than the margins. Although from a place of privilege, when I think about access, I think of equity. I think of the potential and the futurities this concept can support. From social justice to the environmental movement- how can access as a concept, be further incorporated as a core pillar, and what can this do for the bigger picture? Access as hope, as reimagining, as community, as collective, as possibilities.

To outline the research, I begin with the research question. How does language contribute to how people perceive access, inclusion, and disability in urban nature? I argue that access is a sliding scale, especially when it comes to the environment and nature. Recognizing that access falls on a scale is crucial for expanding and incorporating diversity and inclusivity, which can be achieved through analyzing the use of language.

The concept of a sliding scale recognizes that access is not a binary condition, simply juxtaposing inaccessibility versus accessibility. Acknowledging access as a sliding scale lends more flexibility and allows for a more comprehensive view of how access can be experienced by individuals, in various degrees across a broad spectrum. Thus, drawing attention to a sliding scale allows for increased participation by a diversity of individuals and communities. Key qualifiers of access that support diversity include dynamic and contextual (not static); intersectional (recognizing different identities and experiences); and access by degrees (there is not always a yes or no answer to questions of access). To further this definition, access can be recognized through “the lens of belonging by asking how we orient ourselves in spaces” (Lajoie, 2022, p.318); as individuals, and as communities, seeking to move the emphasis away from reconstructing or modifying space as the sole means of achieving greater accessibility. To give a concrete example, when considering improving access and assessing possibilities, the implementation and reconstruction of physical infrastructure (paved roads, ramps, and curbs) is frequently the primary action associated with increased accessibility, particularly in urban settings. Strategies, such as reconstruction and physical adaptation of space, become contentious when applied to natural space, as they often do not work cohesively with the species and biodiversity (flora and fauna) of the environment. The sliding scale of access, alternatively, reflects that for some, access to nature is a physical act, whilst for others, it may be mental, emotional, social, or political. Although the work focuses on physical accessibility, I seek to reflect upon how access is an interdisciplinary and multifaceted concept.

I begin by providing an in-depth explanation of the core definitions used in this study. I hope to help situate the reader in the complexity of the terms, eventually adding insight to the analysis supported by the theoretical framework. Then I outline the research methodology; I

detail the choice of using archival work and situate the archives as the body of data supporting the inquiry.

Key Definitions and Language

Definitions are core to this research, as fundamentally language shifts and changes, and the interpretation of language, as related to themes such as access and inclusion, is critical. My goal in this research is to ensure that: 1) the use of language is digestible and 2) when analyzing deeply complex topics, definitions are provided to ensure clarity. This becomes especially important in the context of archival analysis, as the language of disability and inclusion has shifted drastically over the past decade. I have thus chosen to include detailed explanations of the following terms: access, disability, ableism, and nature/environment; they may be different from the readers' definitions or first assumptions of the words.

Access - The concept of access most popularly, is seen through the lens of inclusion. As Peluso and Ribot state in the *Theory of Access Revisited* (2020), "access emerges within power structures and has to do with the abilities of actors to benefit from things they want to benefit from and control" (2020, p.173). In my research, the term access emphasizes the ability to move through a natural space, experience and be present within it and recognizes human access to nature and ecology through direct experience. Access is defined as the "permission, liberty, or ability to enter, approach, or pass to and from a place or to approach or communicate with a person or thing" (Meriam Webster Inc., 1999, p.1). Based on this definition, participation and ability are the critical indicators of the presence and representation of individuals with physical disabilities in the literature and archival documentation which I have chosen. The research aims to recognize presence and representation at the forefront of the discussion and highlight its underlying presence. Recognizing access as the core component of this analysis, correlated to

confirming the presence and experience of individuals with physical disabilities, seeks to identify both their present involvement and future participation in nature/natural space. As various academics have previously investigated, environmental justice can be linked at its core to access (Adamson et al., 2002; Kafer, 2013; Barca, 2014); through an understanding that "access to wilderness and a reconstituted conception of Nature" are significant and relevant issues in the Anthropocene and current climate crisis. Barriers to access also include the urban/rural juxtaposition discussed by theorists such as Fraser et al., 2015; Burns, 2009; Barca, 2014; and Cella, 2013. Barriers are also investigated at a smaller scale within urban environments by Davis & Edge (2022). They position the "growing recognition of the barriers [of access] due to underlying socio-spatial inequalities" (p.2); when discussing natural space and how this disproportionately affects marginal communities. In addition, a third definition that contributes to situating the term access, drawn from the Keywords for Disability Studies Handbook (2015), in which access is "the power, opportunity, permission, or right to come near or into contact with someone or something... the relationship between the disability body-mind and the environment" (Williamson, 2015, p.14). Within my specific research, I feel Williamson's definition aligns most closely with both the theory and inquiry I seek to express and develop. The environmental justice movement has been critiqued prior (Fenney, 2017; Adamson et al. 2002) for having a limited focus on aspects of the "social and cultural complexity of the current environmental crisis" (Barca, 2014, p.538); inhibiting its ability to reimagine and bring direct attention to notions of inclusivity and access. Inherently, social, and cultural barriers, hierarchies of oppression and capitalist control arise and overlap significantly in environmentalism/environmental justice and critical disability justice, outlining a necessity to

discuss a broader concept of access. However, for this research specifically, I situate access as the sliding scale I outlined prior.

Disability - The term disability features and exists throughout much of my investigation and the major research paper. Disability has frequently been seen as a "dirty word" to be avoided and, as a result, modified and reframed within many liberal or progressive discussions. In various ways, disability is defined alternatively, including ‘differently abled, the disabled/handicapped, able-bodied’ (ADA Network, 2017, p.2). However, using the terms non-disabled and disability, alongside 'person-first language,' places the individual at the center of the description rather than the label, status, or sole focus on the disability. Significant language has begun to be reclaimed by the disabled community, including terms such as *crip*. The term historically was an oppressive and hateful form of degrading language, similar to how the 2SLGBTQIA+ community reclaimed language such as *queer*, which has led to forms of belonging and empowerment by various communities (Wendell, 1989). Disability literature outlines the shift to a social model and away from the medical model of disability, the latter solely focusing on “individual pathology or degeneracy and the rhetorical conflation of normal is natural” (Cram et al., 2023, p.852); as well as narratives seeking to overcome and cure disability. For my analysis, I emphasize and stress the social model as critical in establishing language and understanding that reflects empathy, care, and inclusivity. The social model focuses on “co-constitutive relationships naming how social, sensory, and physical environments become disabling” (Cram et al., 2023, p.852); removing the emphasis from the individual that being disabled is “wrong” and something to change.

The decision to include a thorough explanation of the definitions and language used in this research stems from reflections I had while reading several excerpts from *Waist High in the*

World: A Life Among the Nondisabled, by Nancy Mairs. As Mairs (1999) so eloquently puts it, we must “distinguish “disability,” which is a social construct rather than a medical diagnosis from some of the circumstances associated with it” (Mairs, 1999, p.24). She emphasizes how disability is both metaphorical and material and “evocative of other conditions in time and space” (Mairs, 1999, p.58); leading it to be unique and incomparable to anything but itself. Mairs speaks to how depicting and analyzing disability cannot be done if one attempts to perceive it as a global subject and is simply too broad. Instead, her reflections are contingent upon her own experience:

Through scrutinizing some of these elements common to the human condition- among them adjustment to change, body image, and sexuality, the need for both independence and nurturance, the ceaseless search for equality and justice and pure pleasure [...] bringing to life their particular significance in terms of disability (Mairs, 1999, p.22).

To further elaborate on the definition of disability, I draw from Reno et al., (2021) in which “relations are only ever to purportedly physical, co-present being and forces in this world” (Reno et al., 2021, p.133). However, I want to expand the definition in collaboration with what Garland-Thompson describes as “not only as an actual condition a person may experience but as a variation from some imaged and likely impossible idea, the Normate” (1997, p.8). Thus, disability can be interpreted as a constructed concept, reinforced by societal biases and continually re-ingrained through hegemonic oppression. The acceptance of disability and an understanding that a “Normate” perception is exclusionary is detrimental to the homogenous capitalist society, which is historically why it has not been a part of the status quo. Finally, I highlight the definition and categorization of disability as a socially constructed category, drawing on what Russell (2002) proposes is a by-product of “labour relations, a product of the

exploitative economic structure of capitalist society: one which creates (and then oppresses) the so-called ‘disabled’ body as one of the conditions that allow the capitalist class to accumulate wealth” (p.212). The definition outlines how disability has been situated in current-day society and the barriers and pervasiveness of exclusion in a standardized, homogenous capitalist economy. I remain conscious as a writer that any research analyzing disability is infinitely complex. Despite this, I want to push forward the potential of this subject and thought, to investigate using the “bridges and pathways in the creative process [to] add new knowledge to align richer more inclusive and accessible narratives” (Mcruer, 2006, p.370); and hopefully contribute more discourse and research to the environmental social sciences and humanities, emphasizing disability.

Ableism- In addition to disability, ableism is another important definition within this research and critical disability discourse in general. In citing the Key Terms in the Critical Disability Studies Handbook, ableism defined by Tallila A. Lewis and updated in both 2020 and 2021:

“A system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person’s language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and “behave” (para.1).

Here, the term ableism is situated as an experience that is not strictly placed upon individuals with disabilities (physical, mental, emotional etc.) but can be experienced widely by all individuals within a society. In the previous paragraph, I discussed two main models of

disability (social and medical) and how these models have shaped the narrative surrounding disability. *Disabled Ecologies* speaks to the concept of ableism as “an expansive category or system of oppression that doesn't just impact disabled people or able-bodied people but impacts the way that we think about human and nonhuman life” (Taylor, 2019, p.1). In this way, ableism lends important context to disability discourse and where I as a researcher hope to situate it in the broader discussion on this paper. In expanding ableism to incorporate all human and nonhuman life we situate ourselves and all other beings as being impacted by various oppressive structures of modern-day society. I seek to situate disability and ableism within the paradigms of the status quo and broader society and centralize these definitions' presence in other areas of thought and theory.

Nature/Environment- The definitions of nature and the environment are widely present throughout the data, analysis, and overall research paper. My goal was to reflect on the broader context within which they are situated, first as a constructed environment, and second as a deeply complex space. It is critical to establish here what I mean by the term's *nature* and *environment*. I reference Freeland's (2006) *Canadian Environmental History: essential readings* and the associated chapters to define these terms. Worster (2006) states: “Nature is not one idea but many ideas, meanings, thoughts, and feelings, all piled on top of one another” (p.20); supported and constructed through humans' values and ideas of the natural world, making it a deeply complex term to define. However, in the research, nature encompasses “a web of systemic relationships within the natural world” (Cronon, 1993, p.27); human and non-human alike. This leads to the necessity of situating, “environment” as it remains equally as complex. The natural world cannot be disentangled from humans and as environmental history shows, a physical

environment remains just as important to our understanding as the deeply complex philosophical interpretations of *nature* and *environment* (Freedland, 2006).

In addition, I draw on definitions by theorists who investigate the interrelations of nature, disability, and environment to ground the language of the work. Ray et al. (2017) discuss in the journal series *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: toward an Eco-crip Theory* that nature, wilderness, as well as urban nature space, are not pristine, intact environments but profoundly complex and folded within human beings' social and physical impacts. This definition broadly shifts the perspective of nature away from solely out there, wild, and thus potentially unreachable. Instead, it includes urban nature spaces and human-made nature spaces and grounding them in being equally nature or natural. Additionally, I reflect on work by Eli Clare (2014) in which his depiction of nature draws on conceiving "the multiple slippery meanings of natural and unnatural, [...] a fundamental illogic rooted in the white Western framework separating human animals and nonhuman nature" (Clare, 2014, p.215). The complexity of statements and dialogue discussing natural or non-natural provides the opportunity to recognize how fluid the concept of nature truly is. Clare's perspective recognizes how intertwined we are with nature as a civilization and further allows for the presence of disability discourse to be situated in the dichotomy of "nature" or "not nature" as disability has solely been seen as unnatural in the past and the present.

To further build on these definitions, I include what Adamson et al. (2002) bring to light in the Environmental Justice Reader, Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy. Their contributions and writing in the journal series discuss how the construct of nature "promotes the interests of a select few to the exclusion of all "Others" (Adamson et al., 2002, p.182); mainly referring to different classes, races, and sexual preferences. In addition, the discussion of Nature versus

nature, which originates from the philosopher Neil Evernden, in *The Social Creation of Nature*, describes “the convention of speaking of ‘nature’ when referring to the great amorphous mass of otherness that encloaks the planet and [of] speak[ing] of ‘Nature’ when referring to the system or model of nature which arose in the West several centuries ago (1992, p.182)

The previously outlined set of definitions and choice of language, I hope, will allow the reader to dually reflect upon how nature in the context of this discussion is deeply complex and societally constructed without having to spend a more significant portion of the writing to discuss the reasoning behind this.

Research Methodology

The main objective of my research is twofold. First, it will use the method of archival analysis to situate the broad themes of access, disability and nature and connect them to the research question and main argument. Second, it will use the findings and interpretations of language and quotations from the archival documents to situate the broader theme of access to nature. The research has been approved by York University’s Ethics and Research Board as of February 8th, 2023. It did not use research participants and instead focused on narratives, language and perspectives drawn from archival documents. The core data collected for this research was found in the Toronto Archives Library, located at 255 Spadina Rd, Toronto, Ontario, from a large pool of documents referencing the Leslie Street Spit. Archival analysis is defined as the study of historical documents to provide “us access that we might not otherwise have to the organizations, individuals, and events of that earlier time” (Ventresca & Mohr, 2017, p.806). Archival documents for this analysis involved committee meetings with public members, public organizations such as Friends of the Spit and a variety of articles written during the time frame that reference public members and individual input. The timeframe I used to analyze the

archival references to the Leslie Street Spit is from the 1980s- 2000s. The data provides the grounding to recognize which individuals, agents, considerations, and dialogues slip through the cracks in the broader conversation of access and disability.

I spent four months collecting archival documents from the Toronto Archives Library. During this time, I collected a broad set of data, looking for documents and files that referenced either the Leslie Street Spit or Tommy Thompson Park, to ensure I had an adequate amount of data for the research and analysis. The primary documents I found the most interesting were those relating to public or citizen feedback and opinions about the park as a publicly accessible nature space. A noteworthy share of the data involved newspaper articles and clippings on the park as a space, pamphlets and informational content developed by the Friends of the Spit. The main reason I chose to highlight this kind of content, as opposed to developmental plans or legislation from the City of Toronto, was to focus on citizen voices and narratives by the people using the space. The research process involved searching for records through the online Toronto Archives Database to compile a list of the physical files to analyze. Key terms included Tommy Thompson, Tommy Thompson Park, Leslie Street Spit, Friends of the Spit, urban park, and a combination of the titles with urban, park, nature, and wilderness. I analyzed a total of 20 files of data, which came from a total of 30-40 files, some irrelevant to the research at hand. Over several weeks, countless hours were spent at the archival research hall analyzing text and print documents. A broad analysis of the narratives and interactions surrounding the Leslie Street Spit/Tommy Thompson Park was a part of my analysis to understand the inclusion of discourse of individuals with disabilities. Here, I note that for the in-text citations of the archival documents in this research paper, I included only the folio and box number of each file. The choice arose as I realized that often, excerpts and quotations did not have names or identities

associated with them. A critical finding showed how the invisibility and erasure of individuals with disabilities in archives is present. Erasure is found dually by the lack of their representation and their voices. See Appendix A for the archival citations and description of the files themselves.

After reading through and identifying which files I would be focusing on, I then proceeded to develop a detailed coding system, which sought to break down the data into three core themes I was interested in drawing out. They are as follows: 1) **Access/Accessibility**- References to how individuals access certain spaces in the park and the park itself. TTC transportation, shuttles, walking, biking etc. show a variety of ways this is done/experienced. 2) **Disability**- Direct references to disability in the archival documents. Paying close attention to language, emphasizing dated language or lack of language to describe a diversity of individuals. 3) **Nature**- Descriptive analysis of nature and the construction of a human-made space, what it provides, who is a part of it, and what it entails.

Finally, the data was collected into a large-scale master document, detailing the portfolios and file numbers, the title of the document and the excerpts I deemed relevant to this research paper, with a point form analysis of the content. Then, I created another document, which organized the data and content under the themes, of accessibility, disability, and nature. I chose these specific themes as they provided a broad category for the content I was working with. I knew going into the research that the terminology and academic definitions I would be using might not exist verbatim in these historical documents, therefore solidifying my choice to have broad thematic categories to interpret the archival work.

Situating the Archives

Archival work, defined by Thomas Masters (2009), "is the reader's constructive, subjective ordering and making meaning out of what [they] choose to examine" (p.159); as opposed to a simplified recording of objective data. Analyzing archival works, evolved into a compelling medium for critical disability studies, for my research, as the representation of this community has historically been one on the margins or entirely invisible. Subjectively, we choose what to focus our attention on and what meanings we become aware of, seeking underlying narratives and uncovering new interpretations. In addition, Alberto Manguel's (1998) description of archival work presides on "what you dismiss and what you deem as meaningful" (p.38); allowing for a critical analysis of themes that are often underrepresented or missed. Its importance, however, is tied to this comparison of the subjective and objective. Applying a critical disability lens in the context of archival work presents a deeply subjective standpoint, combined with a sociological and physical critique, which can lead to the reimagining and reconstruction of nature and natural spaces. Further, archival work provides the opportunity for a historical perspective, detailing the complexities of society shifting through time. Disability discourse often reflects and analyzes the historical and cultural roots of systemic biases and perceptions, and choosing archival work is a unique way to achieve this.

I chose the methodological practice of archival analysis for its ability to describe agency (or lack thereof). The concept of agency is a noteworthy topic and theme broadly discussed in critical disability literature when analyzing environmentalism (Fenney, 2019; Nocella, 2017; Wolbring, 2012). My research aims heavily on an outlook of futurity and the potential for what can come from approaching historical archival content through this form of analysis. My research uses a mode of inquiry which seeks to contribute and be a future step-off point in the direction of increased representation, in this area of thought and research. The choice of archival

research draws on what Mikus Brilmyer (2022) discusses in how disability “has the power to extract us from linear, progressive time [casting] us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings” (p.168). In this way, archival documentation has the power and ability to unpack and inquire more deeply into the unique histories of individuals, spaces, and places. It also highlights how historical documentation is rooted and “contingent on place, space, and time-archival absences” (Brilmyer, 2022, p.172). These absences highlight how society both historically and presently erases the experience and representation of individuals with disabilities. The intent behind this research intersects with what Brilmyer (2022) states about researching disability presence in the archives. Archival analysis, Brilmyer states: “reflects on archival anticipation as an avenue for us to hold a not-so-cruel pessimism at the fore; to endure the present draw on our unique individual and collective knowledge of the past and propel us toward a very crip idea of futurity” (2022, p.186). My choice of utilizing a research methodology that analyzes archival documentation, allowed me to juxtapose past, present, and future potentials.

The Leslie Street Spit- An Example of Urban Nature

I begin this portion of the paper with an important question for the reader. When you think about access to nature, what does this nature look like? Do you think of densely packed Boreal forests, the shoreline of a Great Lake, or maybe a rocky mountain top, adorned with snow and ice? Maybe you think of an expansive prairie, a small bubbling creek, a complex woodland trail network or a small park behind your house. Or maybe you think of the rooftop garden you walk by on your way home or even the tree that grows outside the window of your office. As I’ve previously mentioned, access is deeply intertwined with our material and physical environments. These environments are additionally construed by the thoughts, pictures and

descriptions made of them. Thus, the perception of the space becomes a key qualifier in opening or closing off the environment to different individuals and communities. The foundation of my research question is built upon my desire to analyze access, disability, and nature, in historical archival documentation using the Leslie Street Spit as an example. I desire to examine the *presence* and *representation* highlighted by the use of language. To understand this concept of access more deeply, there is the need for recognition of the diversity of society and civilization, bringing attention to who is present, how they experience, or how they move to and within environments, in this case, urban nature.

First, I include a small section describing the Leslie Street Spit. I hope to provide the reader with the basic knowledge of the place and space, as an environmental and natural landscape. I want to emphasize there is much to know about the Spit. However, in this research, it is simply as an example of natural urban space, used to explore disability and language in archival research. Next, the theoretical framework will be outlined to position the research from an overarching perspective, using eco-ableism, eco-crip theory and an environmental justice lens. The paper and research in its entirety, is interpreted through a critical disability lens, which will be discussed more in-depth in the discussion portion of this paper. The data drawn from the archives, followed by the discussion of the theories outlined, fundamentally situates the language and representation found in the archives and draws ties between the core themes. Finally, I will conclude with some brief thoughts on the discussion of language as it relates to environmental education and the creation of inclusive spaces.

My research aims to highlight and emphasize the conversation of access and inclusion that has already begun to be developed in the environmental field, but I suggest it requires more emphasis and attention. Therefore, I investigated the language and the representation of

disability, found in the historical documentation I analyzed. In the analysis, I mainly focus on access from the perspective of physicality, that is physical disability and the barriers that surround it, as well as access to both space and place as by-products of the latter. That is the inquiry into the lack of *access* and *presence* of individuals with physical disabilities in the urban nature. As the environmental movement progresses and becomes more developed, there is a need for diversity in this space (Ray et al.; 2017, Gemein, 2014; McCarthy & Prudham, 2004; Kosanic et al., 2022). The natural world is a perfect example of a wonderful, complex, colourful, and multifaceted conglomerate of diverse species, and therefore our connection to and our interconnectedness with the natural world should adequately reflect the same diversity. I want to reinstate and clarify here that the form of access I am reflecting upon, is not a homogenous structure or standardization of place, space, or being. Instead, defined access can be recognized as the understanding that individuals with a diversity of needs, experiences and ways of being can connect to and within space, including the natural world. This is the core intent behind my research, although I reflect and recognize it is only a small contribution to a vast and ever-developing area of inquiry.

A Descriptive Account of the Spit as Urban Nature

The Leslie Street Spit, also known as Tommy Thompson Park, is in my opinion one of Toronto's most unique and interesting urban natural spaces. To me, it is a place that recognizes the boundaries of what is natural versus not natural, at one time a waste management dump, now a unique ecosystem. It is a place grounded in potential.

I have been lucky to experience the joy and awe of moving through The Leslie Street Spit just a handful of times now. As I have moved through the Spit, be it walking or cycling, I am continually surprised by the complexity of the space itself. It is human-made by origin, an

accumulation of debris from the ever-changing and growing city. At the same time, it is a wilderness, left to grow and flourish in all its convolutedness, becoming a place and home to many flora and fauna. It has challenged my perspectives on what is natural and what is not, a space crafted through the external output of humans, abandoned and then in time and limited help from city dwellers, has grown into something astounding. For example, if you sit on the jumbled rocks, surrounded by old re-bar and bricks, smoothed by the wear of time at the point of the peninsula, you almost forget you are near a hustling downtown core. Over the years it has become a “culmination of deeply entangled social and natural processes” (Donnelley, 2022, p.6); for humans and nonhumans alike. The space itself provides a home for wildlife to flourish alongside many recreational opportunities. As I discuss the concept of space and place, I will be using the definition proposed by Levine et al. (2004) in which place is “a material environment, [but] also how we, as embodied beings, move in, absorb, shape and are shaped by it” (p.563); therefore, how individuals, human and non-humans mutually create place by their presence within it. This is a critical recognition, as it can be tied back to my original desire to do this research, grounded in increasing the representation and language of individuals with disabilities in urban natural spaces and places. Levine et al. (2004) further discuss the unfixed nature of place and the accounts of differing sectors in the field of “how we, as social agents, interact with and within it, gather and attach meanings, and forge relationships and identities” (p.563). The Spit has pushed me to reflect as a researcher on the complexity of space and place, especially in the context of the natural world. In this work, I chose to refer to this urban natural space by its more informal name, Leslie Street Spit (or the Spit), as opposed to Tommy Thompson Park, as I feel it more fluidly encompasses the space as more than simply a “park”. As defined by De Haas (2021), urban green spaces are “urban land, partly, or completely covered in grass, trees, shrubs,

or other vegetation” (p.1). This definition can include but is not limited to “parks, community gardens and cemeteries, but also rooftop gardens and vertical gardens, meadows, and woods (De Haas, 2021, p.1). The Spit has been described by many as a unique urban wilderness and in physical and structural terms is defined as a [human] peninsula, extending five kilometres into Lake Ontario and is over 500 hectares in size. (TRCA, n.d, para.4) Simply put, the Leslie Street Spit is an urban natural wild space, and structurally, I suggest it holds a vast amount of potential for access and inclusion from a material and physical standpoint. Analyzing archival documents, surrounding such a unique space, can additionally aid in extending our conversations of access, language, and disability. In addition, it aids in reconstructing the perceptions of how we describe and interpret access to nature, for instance through the perspective of critical disability narratives, which can then be applied to increase inclusivity in areas such as environmental education and environmentalism broadly. To support this, a key component of individual connection and immersion in nature falls along the lines of inspiring awe. As I was writing this research paper, I was privileged to attend a conference hosted by the Outdoor Council of Educators (COEO) on inclusion and access to outdoor education. During the weekend one of the presenters at the conference has very profound reflections on outdoor experience. According to him “If you have the predisposition, and you are excited and seeing awe [...] and you are open to it, others will see it too” (G. Linney, personal conversation, September 24, 2023). Awe is critical to our awareness of and our connection to the natural world. In its complexity, the Spit elicits this sort of awe for me. Cycling or walking through this space, over its bridges, down its small gravel side paths, and standing at its furthest point, observing the expanse of Lake Ontario, in a small and large way is an outstanding experience. So simple, yet so complex, an ideal environment for the potential and imagining I have previously touched upon. Grounding my

choice of the Spit as the core example and foundation for the archival research, I then analyzed the themes of disability, access, and inclusion in an urban natural space/place.

Theoretical Framework: Language and Eco-Crip Theory

Overarchingly, my research reflects on the core themes of access, inclusion, disability, as well as language and participation in urban natural space. I analyze by using the theories of environmental justice, in conjunction with critical disability theories, specifically eco-crip theory and eco-ableism. Eco-crip theory, coined by theorists Ray et al. (2017), analyses and focuses its inquiry on intersecting disability with environmental studies, and actively seeks to center the disabled experience in environmental narratives and dialogue. It recognizes the presence of disability in nature, where historically in academic and other sectors, it has not been seen as such. A large pool of literature currently speaks to the intersection of disability and environmentalism, but a much smaller one focuses on *physical* disability and access (Stienstra et al., 2012; Schmidt, 2022; Lajoie, 2022; Senier, 2013). I begin by grounding the research under the theoretical framing of environmental justice. Environmental justice (EJ) is a theoretical strain that contributes to my research paper, supporting the more specific theories and modes of thinking from disability studies. Quiet broadly, environmental justice seeks to understand and analyze how the environmental cost of production at a societal level, driven by capitalist economies, unevenly affects humans and non-humans alike, through social, spatial, racial, gender and generational differences (Barca, 2014). I add ability as a difference to this list, as it reflects the critical disability lens I am using for this work. This is where language and representation come into play, as environmental justice recognizes the need to understand the intricacies of oppressive systems, and then to bridge it with disability studies, resulting in the theory coined eco-crip. Insulated within environmental justice, participative justice engages

“equitable access in the decision-making process and also predicting inequitable outcomes” (Clark & Percy-Smith, 2006, p.2). Representation and presence in the decision-making process, be it related to transportation, education, or arts, is critical. Without equitable access, connection is lost, and barriers form or in cases where they are already present, become even more impenetrable. As Polly Atkins states, in the work titled: *All the Living I Have Left to Do: A Disability Poetic of Dwelling*, there is an interest in understanding “how we relate to our environment, and how we narrate our environment, how current practices unintentionally but systematically exclude disabled people” (2021, para.8); perfectly describing my interest and desire to inquire into this topic. This statement emphasizes the need as a society to look at the environment and nature through a more connected, disability and social mode of inquiry. Additionally, universalistic approaches further marginalize individuals and communities who are already present in these justice spaces. Moving away from these structures can lead to radically reimagining our ways of being and interacting with the environment and the natural world.

When looking at the larger picture, and justice-based movements, the simple act of recognition can radically push to encompass more experiences. I suggest the perception of nature can be bound to the cultural and historical ideas held individually at a societal scale. Human interconnectedness with nature runs deep, as almost everything in the natural world is touched by human beings. I contemplate how natural spaces are built or how they naturally form, and how to interpret the level of accessibility these places have. I question the role, place, and presence of disability within nature, emphasized through language and representation. I hope to open the inquiry to new interpretations of being, recognizing and experiencing nature and the outdoors, regardless of an individual’s physical ability.

I reflect on what Schmidt (2021) critically discusses in the work of *cripping* environmental education, how we can "disrupt how the philosophical foundations of the field rest upon compulsory able-bodied/sane assumptions and the inability to connect to and care for nature" (p.3). To crip something is to reconstruct it, and as a result, it becomes more multifaceted, unique, and diverse. I want to note, that from my point of view as an able-bodied researcher, I use the term crip as a verb, to situate my research. The disruption of the field by criping it, is what I connect the research with most, and I think is highly relevant to this work. In theorizing and understanding which framework this research falls within, I recognize the need to disrupt and pivot when discussing access to the natural world and outdoors. This is where the issue of language becomes critical. The use of eco-crip theory holds the potential to create and foster spaces that allow for changes and a reimagining of experience. Mcurer and Berube (2005) highlight how crip theory supports a "coming out" through realizing and reimagining more accessible worlds and experiences. As Mcurer and Berube describe, disability is continually pushed by society to the margins, viewed as "a material against which the imagined world is formed" (2006, p.72); and placing it as separate and outside of the "normal." Crip theory in this analysis is a building block leading to the foundation of this specific research, eco-crip theory.

In attempting to situate the presence of disability one step further in the theoretical framework I draw on eco-ableism. I described ableism in the definitions portion of this paper, but eco-ableism draws a similar conceptual framing more related to nature and the environment. Defined, eco-ableism is "the privileging of typically abled bodies and minds through environmental design, practices, and discourses (including stereotypes and bias against disabled environmental communicators)" (Cram et al., 2022, p.852); and this bias pushes forth the narrative that there is a correct or ideal form of being or personhood, through various forms of

ableism. Eco-crip theory reinstates the necessity of including those voices and communities who remain at the margins of the environmental field, as well as experiences in nature and the outdoors. The current section has outlined frameworks and components that contributed to the analysis and body of the research paper. The next section of this research summarizes the findings, or the core data, collected for this study.

Data: Archival References to the Language of Access, Disability and Nature

For the readers' ease, I have systematically organized the findings under the three key themes which are: access, disability, and nature. The core data emerged through the use of significant phrases and language found in the archives. Again, the timeframe of this data, for this specific study spans from the late 1970s to the 2000s and includes all data mentioning the Leslie Street Spit or Tommy Thompson Park. I chose to look at a broad timeframe, as I inferred that the total amount of data collected would be too limited otherwise. Finally, it is important to note that my research is solely archival and does not include current city planning and Toronto Region Conservation Authority documents, as I chose to emphasize historical language and presence. For all archival references, the box and folio number are listed after each quote. The associated box and file are listed with further details in Appendix A.

Accessibility- Physical and Social

To remind the reader, in my research access is meant both physically (mobility and access to physical space) and socially, that is, pushing against societal obstacles and pressures to achieve an entry point into elements of society that may be exclusive or unreachable. In a simplistic form, access is “permission, liberty, or ability to enter, approach, or pass to and from a place” (Merriam Webster Inc., 1999). However, to further extend the definition as per the contextual nature of my research, access is also defined as “ability, rather than rights, [...] this

formulation brings attention to a wider range of social relationships that can constrain or enable people to benefit from resources” (Myers & Hansen, 2020, p.147).

While investigating and collecting data from the archival files, the term *access* came up more often than anticipated. However, as mentioned in the prior section it is important to note the standardized and universal nature of this definition within this context. A large portion of the content referencing language such as “access”, “accessibility”, and “accessible” were often in direct reference to the access of space, be it through transportation or public ability to use the park as an urban natural space. Additionally, almost all the content reflected aspects of urban design and development from this universal perspective. For example, one excerpt argues to: “acknowledge that a key percept of urban design is the provision of wilderness space easily accessible to the city” (Box 143842 Folio 6). At the same time, the excerpt highlights the primary mode of physical access as: “permission, liberty and ability to enter approach or pass” (Merriam Webster Inc., 1999); which comes from a more general and universalistic perspective. The quote, additionally, can be viewed through the analysis of opposing modes of city infrastructure versus citizenship. A second excerpt highlights that the aim of much of the work done by the Friends of the Spit, in securing the Spit as a place and greenspace was to “ensure the Spit is *accessible* with no admission charge, *to all people*” (Box 255931 Folio 8). Also, within the same realm, various excerpts on citizen mobilizing included “respect the years of public discussion devoted to ensuring that the Leslie Street Spit is *enjoyable to all* and not, the preserve of a vocal minority” (Box 199071 Folio 9). Both excerpts highlight an attempt at positing accessibility, however, they maintain tones of universalism and inclusion that still miss the mark in terms of more radical and inclusive forms of disability organizing, which does not only reflect universal needs but also recognizes the unique individual nature of disability. Other references to

access included, physical access and transportation directions, references for individuals to get to the space. Another interesting excerpt of note was found in an essay written about the park by Johnson (1984) *Leisure and Recreation on Urban Waterfronts: Problems and Prospects*.

Although dated, the paper held crucial findings, as it solidified those urban natural spaces, such as the Spit, have had and continue to have problems with physical and perceptual access. Access is recognized here as a continuously evolving and complicated subject and is especially relevant in many environmental and natural spaces, especially in urban contexts. From the essay, I found two excerpts to be specifically interesting. First, Johnson (1984) explicitly highlights two main problems of access which are:

“1) physical (long distance from the place of residence or employment, heavy traffic, roads, railways) and 2) perceptual (complicated or indirect access routes, visual barriers created by elevated expressways, unfriendly warning signs.) The most common circumstance is simply that the entire port area is fenced -access points are usually few, far between and unattractive they exist at all” (Box 206390 Folio 12).

The perceptual and physical dynamics and differences in access are highlighted here and provide context and structure to examples and differences between the types of access that are often thought of with natural spaces, and especially urban natural spaces, detailing the realities of how this construct and predicates the space itself. The essay specifically addresses once again universal and more physical facets of access, not necessarily tied to aspects of inclusion or disability. However, the second mode of access, perceptual, addresses more complex forms of barriers that apply contextually to aspects of inclusion that I believe accurately encompass the disabled perspective. The difference between perceptual and physical access allows us to question what true access is, or could be, as it is often excluded in cases such as this, where the

emphasis remains on physical approaches to accessibility, such as universal design and infrastructure. Also, another excerpt from this essay identifies the perception and “concept of “public urban wilderness” implicitly designates an area as openly accessible to all members of the public” (Box 820190 Folio 17). Although still identifying universalism in a way, this quote recognizes the need for access to a larger pool of members of the community. Once again, the language and use of these definitions for interpretation remain context-dependent and are often situated from the perspective of public infrastructure access, and larger-scale planning and development. I urge that this should not be seen as completely invalid when looking from a critical disability lens, as it still provides a foundation or starting point. Access to a space, in terms of a destination, is the first point, the beginning for anyone.

Alternatively, some excerpts were drawn from the archival documents that reflected the concept of access through a more radical and critical disability-oriented lens. First, in investigating meeting minutes surrounding the potential development of the Leslie Street Spit into an aquatic park in the early 70s, a public committee member highlighted her concerns about access. Specifically, Ms. McLaughlin “suggested that the Committee consider its objective to minimize car use in the park as there are both disadvantages and advantages associated with this decision. She expressed concern about the possibility of inadequate access to the park” (Box 145461 Folio 23). I highlight the quote, as a very important excerpt drawn from the archives. It reflects public consultation citizen discourse and involvement in the use of the Leslie Street Spit and emphasizes first, that mobility can be inhibited if car use cannot be used within a certain radius of the space. Additionally, the excerpt leads to reflections on just how accessible the space is via public transportation as there is still a stretch of distance between the TTC stop and the gates/entrance to the park to this day. As mentioned in the previous excerpts, the difference

between physical access and perceptual access is incredibly important to consider. Secondly suggestions that were made by this committee members highlighted the need to 1) “provide a range of facilities for a variety of age and income groups...and 2) add necessary ingredients in any major park i.e., good access, bicycle, and pedestrian paths...” (Box 145461 Folio 23). These suggestions not only highlighted the need for access to be multifaceted, in this case from a more socioeconomic perspective but also stated that a primary ingredient to major natural or park spaces is access.

Finally, for the access section of the data I want to highlight an opposition perspective, referring to accessibility. Drawn from a newspaper article detailing citizen feedback on the use of the Spit a member of the community stated: “Users of the Leslie Street Spit have all managed thus far with the way the area is now and believe it or not WE LIKE IT THE WAY IT IS. The ruggedness and even the “inaccessibility” of the area are part of its charm and great appeal” (Box 138924 Folio 20). The term inaccessibility brings up important thoughts and provocations for discussion. Why does nature need to be inaccessible and what benefits come from this subjective positioning of it? Is a direct reference to something being inaccessible recognized as better, particularly in the context of nature? With dated descriptions of wilderness and nature, this is a common trope, rooted in the American corporeal wilderness presence, being white, masculine, colonial and able-bodied as highlighted by Ray (2009). Given the words “ruggedness” and even the “inaccessibility”, these two words are placed in direct opposition to each other however, there are many examples where ruggedness is construed as “inaccessible” when this may not be the case. Highlighting inaccessibility, and the interpretation of the language, inspires an intention to reimagine and change the framing of what true access/experience to something means, moving away from ableist and patriarchal wilderness ideologies— a direct correlation to Eli Clare. Clare’s

work profoundly addresses the complexity of disability presence in the natural world, through inquiries into cure politics, the destruction of nature combined with the erasure of disability. I have reflected on Clare's work, titled, "Notes on Natural Worlds, Disabled Bodies, and a Politics of Cure", in which he states "I am one body, a tremoring, slurring human body, among many kinds of bodies. Could it all be this complexly woven yet simple? (Yes and no)" (Clare, 2014, p.206). Clare encapsulates a juxtaposition of complexity and simplicity, within the reality of the presence of disability in our society today emphasizing the experience of simply existing.

Another excerpt details this "rough" perception, where "the Spits roughness is one of its main attractions. Let it remain undeveloped and remain an unpolished, free *access* to cyclists, runners' picnic-lovers, naturalists, bathers, and walkers" (Box 143842 Folio 4). Again, highlighting the need for free access, although lacking the theme of disability, access is general and broad in its definition here. The excerpt also highlights the perception that "true" environments and nature spaces should be inaccessible, revoked, and separate, and only experienced by those who could integrate into them in this "true natural form" (Clare, 2014, p.206). The excerpts drawn from this specific section show the juxtaposition between universalist approaches to access as a definition and concept, while also highlighting the opposite perspective where nature is seen as separate from both access and disability generally. The language of access from the archives proved to be more fluid and inclusive than anticipated, which as the overarching theme of the body of work supports the argument that access can be seen on a sliding scale. In the next section of the data/results, the language around disability will be highlighted and outlined in a similar way to access.

Disability- Language and Representation

As mentioned in the methodological and theoretical frameworks, for the research paper, both an environmental and ecological justice framework and importantly a critical disability lens, are applied to the archival work to detail and investigate the presence and representation of disability and access to the Spit, through language. First, I address content that makes direct references to disability, through the terms “disabled, handicapped, or disability” and direct references to mobility aids, mainly wheelchairs. I found that in the archival content I was investigating, in the timeframe of the 1970s to the 2000s, the terms for describing disability were dated. This was not surprising, as I have already mentioned, based on how numerous historical, social, and cultural shifts in Canadian society have been recognizing inclusion and disability; yet there are still significant barriers to face and work to do. Dated terminology includes “differently abled, challenged, handicapped or special,” (ADA Network, 2017, para.6). These are dated terms as they do not use “accurate, neutral and objective language” (ADA Network, 2017, para.1). Moreover, because people should not be defined as solely oneself because of their disability, these expressions lack the emphasis of first-person language, which aims to focus the person first and disability second. As it prioritizes the individual as a core and does not label them, exclusively as *being* their disability, the first-person narrative is the foundation of inclusive language.

For example, the excerpt “like many recreation-oriented problems, there is a basic lack of information on a wide range of topics; demand, participation, behaviour patterns, transportation, the needs of special users’ groups (e.g., young, old, *disabled*, poor) intervening and opposing opportunities sand substitutability” (Box 206390 Folio 12). Participation is highlighted in this excerpt with direct reference to special groups such as “disabled” ones and although the language

is dated, it remains important to include. Additionally, another reference that occurred in several of the documents defined the physical mobility aid (wheelchair) instead of disability.

“If you visited these lands this summer, you’ll have noticed that the public, your constituents have already decided their fate. En masse, they cycle, rollerblade, walk and *wheelchair* their way through this area. While planners wait, this entire area has become prime recreational open space” (Box 138924 Folio 20).

The quotation reflects themes such as the pace of life, ability, and experience in the Spit.

However, the term *wheelchairing* through a space, in this context, is situated the same as cycling, walking etc. The sentence itself encapsulates more inclusivity to me than I have seen in literature to date. The description of wheelchairing through the Spit embodies the concept and the idea that individuals move through spaces differently. I find the reference to be fascinating and I know it will be a core example I continue to use in my future work. This was the first and only time I saw this term arise in the archival analysis. Based on this example, I inferred that having references to different ways of moving through space in archival documents is quite rare. Another example of this is: “The traffic on this neck of the Spit will alter the Spit experience for those of us who think that half the fun is getting there on our own (that is, by foot, on bikes, or for a few, in wheelchairs)” (Box 138924 Folio 20). In these two excerpts there is a specific reference to wheelchairs which I did not find arose as often throughout all the content I reviewed. Another layer is thus added to the broad definition of access in the documents and emphasizes the specific needs and diversity of diverse individuals who utilize the Spit. These excerpts recognize the presence of physical disability, in terms of a small and present proportion of the population, specific to physical mobility.

Another portion of the archival documents included comments from the community around the Leslie Street Spit Bus/Transportation Shuttle. The shuttle was described as a temporary transportation solution that allowed members of the Toronto community who may not have access to a vehicle to shuttle down to the entrance of the Spit. Comments included “good idea especially for elderly, *handicapped*” (Box 138924 Folio 20); and “only for the elderly, schools or the *disabled*” (Box 138924 Folio 20). Another excerpt stated that the shuttle should be incorporated, “only to the entrance and not free for normal, healthy people.” (Box 138924 Folio 20) Although some of the archival comments and feedback reference both disabled and handicapped identities, there was also a very dated and interesting comment surrounding “normal, healthy people”. I think this is critical to include in my analysis because of the healthy versus abnormal paradigm that it plays into, which is in contrast to crip theory and the social model of disability. It illustrates the notion of people with physical disabilities or limitations, being located outside of natural places. As a result, their presence is believed to be limited to selected types of natural space, such as paved, manicured parks. When looking at who is present in natural space, again, I emphasize that there needs to be more focus on the diversity of experiences and individuals who make up an environment; physical, material or otherwise. The next section of the data will discuss the final theme of nature and how it is located and represented in the archival documents I reviewed.

Nature- The Dichotomy of Natural/Unnatural

The definition and conceptual understanding of nature is widely complex, even more so when attempting to address intersectional, radical, and reconstructed modes of thinking and understanding of space. First, when interpreting the use of the term, the definition and perception of nature seem to be continuously shifting and changing. For example, nature as a concept is

often perceived as woodland forests, great expanses of prairies or steep mountain cliffs. At the same time, nature can be as simple as the tree on your lawn, or the small scrappy greenspace that has pushed its way through the cracks of the concrete of an abandoned building lot. Thus, contextually as a researcher, I have attempted to situate it to the best of my ability within this specific work. As I have already mentioned, the Leslie Street Spit is an incredibly unique example of natural space. Drawn from the archives, this definition wholly encompasses its uniqueness; “from landfill to an urban oasis, Tommy Thompson Park has a Spit personality: it’s a paradox: a secluded spot in the heart of the city, a natural area and yet one of its most unnatural as well” (Box 401287 Folio 9). The definition of space as a dichotomy, both unnatural and natural simultaneously, can be thematically tied to the essence of how eco-crip theory and environmental justice consider eco-ableism and disability advocacy and representation in the social and environmental sectors.

Coding and analyzing the use of the word “nature” I found to be quite a complex task. Within the archival documents, I found such a vast diversity of definitions and excerpts detailing urban nature: for example, wild, accidental, untamed, wilderness, and unmanaged. In addition, some excerpts depicted nature in this context as managed, urban, naturally seeded, and unique. The Leslie Street Spit provides Toronto and the downtown core with an escape to a wild and wonderful peninsula of life, close to the city itself. While coding for the theme of nature I found two broad categories of interest. The first was the theme of “wild” as the space itself has been designated as an accidental wilderness. Excerpts from the *Canadian Geographical Journal* for instance debated on whether “will it be a “people” park or a “wildlife” park” (Box 206390 Folio 1); and the dichotomy of human versus non-human life’s presence on the Spit. In the archives, there were statements, by citizens mobilizing for the use of the space as a park and wilderness

reserve, such as “It will also prepare those who wish to view the natural areas as something “wild” with the right frame of mind” and “the Leslie Street Spit, because of its wild and unmanaged state, afford learning opportunities not normally found in or even near a large city were of specific interest” (Box 206390 Folio 10); were found by citizens mobilizing for the use of the space as a park and wilderness reserve. Public feedback and statements were indicative of the many reasons individuals thought the Spit should not be developed, during this specific time frame. Many of the rationales surrounding plans and pushback against development highlight that it directly opposes and provides individuals with a reconnection with “pristine natural space” (Ray, 2009, p.30); (roughness, quietness, retreat). An intriguing comment involved nature’s ability to “transform man’s ugly work” insinuating nature’s ability to change the work of men. I find it interesting to think of nature transforming man’s work, in comparison to society erasing marginal communities like those with disabilities. As a result, how do spaces of nature in the urban context provide ample opportunity for connection and reimagining of one’s identity and self? In recent years, society’s orientation, and knowledge of our interrelations as humans with nature and the natural world have evolved substantially, both internally and externally to the environmental sector and academia (Lumber et al., 2017; Taylor, 2017). An excerpt pulled from the archives explains it eloquently and reflects that individuals’ interactions with nature “are rooted in larger changes, in society’s perceptions and values where people are now seeking a newer definition of a proper relation with nature” (Box 206390 Folio 1). Interesting examples appear in the archival quotes discussing “people” and “nature”. In this context, the main reference seems to be people’s use of space. The discussion of a “people park” or a “wildlife park” is an interesting way to understand who “people” and “wildlife” actually are, and the

juxtaposition this creates compared to the significant lack of presence and representation of disability in the archival materials.

Finally, I reflect on a quotation found within the archives which I suggest details quite eloquently the complexity of the definition of nature and environmental “space”. There is a constant push and pull in environmentalism, seeking out means and decisions made in society to address the present climate crisis and the ongoing destruction of our natural surroundings. Found within this collection of documents surrounding the Leslie Street Spit was the following profound quotation: “*The attainment of one environmental objective should not be at the expense of another environmental success*” (Box 206390 Folio 1). The quotation speaks quite eloquently to the concepts and ideas I have surrounding this research. In seeking to understand our relationships with nature, to enjoy it and to care for it we must not fall into the trap of hierarchical priorities. While there are many environmental objectives and I do not seek to invalidate them, it is easy to slip and prioritize some things over others, as concepts like eco-ableism and eco-crip theory highlight. To further expand this archival excerpt, I maintain that the attainment of one environmental objective should not be at the expense of our relations to different “natures” and more than human nature in whatever shape they may take if an ethic of care and attention to understanding remains.

Discussion/Analysis

Disability and Access on a Sliding Scale

In this section, I outline how the language of access arose in the archival work and how this shaped the representation and perception of access for individuals with physical disabilities. Then, I will argue how the idea that access is situated on a sliding scale matters, particularly in narratives surrounding the environment and nature. Next, I outline the use of language and

representation for disability. I will then use this discussion to outline how access and disability and the language surrounding them, can lead to increased inclusivity in environmental education. The argument seeks to continue to bridge the gap between disability and nature/the environment, supported by the idea that the Leslie Street Spit is a distinctive example of this work/conversation.

Following Lajoie’s phenomenological point of view in which “access lies at the intersection of bodies, worlds and the everyday practices and norms that determine the intersubjective shape of belonging” (2022, p.319); I discuss the language of access, disability, and bodies. The discussion is broken into two parts, the first detailing physical infrastructure and access and the second disability representation. Both sections are grounded in the idea that the way these terms are described and shown, from a language perspective, supports the argument stated prior.

Physical Infrastructure and Access

The first point of this discussion is based on the physical and immediate infrastructure of the Leslie Street Spit. The Spit has developed around a 5 km stretch of paved road, which originally was used for construction and transportation of materials to the furthest point. As years have passed other infrastructure has been incorporated, including small wooden bridge paths, and a network of gravel paths that web out from the main paved pathway. It is important to note that the paved road infrastructure does not extend to the furthest point of the peninsula, however, wooden bridges and gravel, paths make up the rest of the way. Regardless of this from the perspective of physical accessibility, the Spit is an incredibly accessible natural space. One of the main points of conversation that arose in the archival analysis I conducted, were references to the physical nature of the space. For instance, the “acknowledgement that the key perception of

urban design is the provision of wilderness space easily accessible to the city” (Box 206390 Folio 12). In utilizing the theoretical framework of my research, I interpreted the excerpt in two ways. First, it highlights the need for emphasizing access in the design of urban spaces, and it is critical that this also encompasses natural urban space. Placing importance on the design and use of a natural space brings more attention to the overarching conversation of physical access and use in the space. In an academic archival piece written on the Spit, by Richard Johnson (1984) (during the time frame of my research) the discussion of physical and perceptual design is analyzed in which he recognizes the two kinds of access problems: 1) physical (long distance from the place of residence or employment, heavy traffic, roads, railways) and; 2) perceptual (complicated or indirect access routes, visual barriers created by elevated expressways, unfriendly warning signs) (Box 206390 Folio 12). The infrastructure and physical qualities of the Spit are already in place. However, as my research paper has shown, our societal and perceptual understandings of who is in these spaces are somewhat lacking. As a result, while Spit's users include birders, naturalists, bathers, and frolickers, there is also the potential to advocate more clearly that the space is easily accessible for individuals with physical disabilities or simply more limited mobility. Addressing this through language and the recognition that this perception of access has been present since the Spit's origin, is a wonderful finding in terms of representation. Another excerpt from the archives juxtaposes a conversation of physical infrastructure and access stating that as a concept “public urban wilderness implicitly designates an area as openly accessible to all members of the public” (Box 206390 Folio 12). From this quote, the perception recognizes that public urban natural space should be openly accessible. These examples situate my discussion in recognizing that again the Spit, as an example of an urban natural space, already has the physical infrastructure for access and inclusion. However, the importance that

language plays is that when advocating for accessible natural space, the representation is not quite there yet. When visiting the Spit, aspects such as accessible signage, checkpoints or other knowledge that could be beneficial for those with physical disabilities could lead to increasing representation. This is where the point of language becomes more critical, as it can inform and put individuals at ease while in the physical space.

Disability and Representation

The Friends of the Spit, a community group that organized and continues to ensure that the Spit remains a protected and preserved natural urban space, provided this research with significant findings in the archives. Documentation surrounding the Friends of the Spit focused mainly on citizen perception and advocacy for the Spit. For example, a quotation that came up many times in culling through the archival documents was “*accessible to all.*” The line, accessible to all, came up in documents primarily discussing official park plans and policy development documents but also was a huge statement point from the community perspective. Taking it one step further I came across a quotation stating the need to “ensure the Spit is accessible with no admission charge, to all people” (Box 255931 Folio 8). In the former excerpt, there is a direct emphasis on the need for access to encompass all people, which is reflective both in terms of socioeconomic status (no admission charge) and I suggest, facets of identity, although not directly stated. Interpreting these statements and the feedback from citizen dialogue and opinion on the space, brought me back to attempting to further bridge the gap between disability and nature, framed through increased access. Another quotation, in the same vein, spoke to “public discussion devoted to ensuring that the Leslie Street Spit is *enjoyable to all* and not, the preserve of a vocal minority” (Box 199071 Folio 9). In this excerpt, the reference was made to the development plans and opposing advocacy from sailing clubs wanting to utilize the Spit as

port infrastructure. Again, this is where the importance of language occurs, because through this interpretation one can suggest that access is dually addressed. I seek to emphasize again that, often without representation, access is not as strong a strategy in practice. The previous archival excerpt interests me as I draw from it that the use of the Spit was to ensure that the enjoyment was diverse and for many people. However, I inquire who “all” truly is in this context. As a society advocating for open access and inclusion, how do we ensure that truly “all” can use and participate? Johnson (1984, p.4) discusses recreation and how “there is a basic lack of information on a wide range of topics; demand, participation, behaviour patterns, transportation, the needs of special users’ groups (poor, ill, the *disabled*).” (Box 206390 Folio 12) An archival excerpt, in a file containing a plethora of community feedback and advocacy, by the Friends of the Spit, pushing to ensure there were no vehicles allowed on the Spit (mainly cars driven by users of the space) a community member stated: “the traffic on this neck of the Spit will alter the Spit experience for those of us who think that half the fun is getting there on our own (that is, by foot, on bikes, or for a few, in wheelchairs).” (Box 138924 Folio 20) In finding this excerpt I was surprised and excited, as it described and outlined a disabled perspective in historical documents that was not exclusionary or demeaning. In both cases, the use of language is inclusive in a way I didn’t think I would find in historical documentation. These quotations further illustrate the representation I was so interested in finding, as well as serve as an example of accessible and inclusive language in the details and knowledge of the individuals who use the Spit. In the physical files, the representation of disability is there, in the ink and print of the Toronto archives. In expecting minimal or potentially no references to disability within the Spit, I was wonderfully surprised by this excerpt. I reflect on Eli Clare’s (2014) work and the discussion of how “culture dictates disability” (p.214); and how the societal view of disability pushes it to the

margins, continuously. However, the “absence of disability even the desire for its absence diminished human experience and the inextricable interweaving of bio and cultural diversity” (Clare, 2014, p.214). The identities and experiences of human beings should not be separated from experience. Discussing nature and the outdoors, literature has shown a common narrative, that disability does not have a place in nature, both in physical terms and in terms of body and identity (Alaimo, 2017; Ray et al., 2017); a side point that has many interesting paths of inquiry but is beyond the scope of this research project. In investigating the archives, and current dialogue surrounding the Spit, I found that disability is present, but *then* can be used to ground future work that seeks to *emphasize* and *increase* the representation of disability.

Next, when investigating the archives the term disabled, disability, or individual(s) with a disability came up marginally, which was an expectation I had before beginning this research. The representation and presence of disability, therefore, remains the jumping off or starting point. The simple recognition of the fact that: a) disability is a part of nature in terms of the space and those who use it; and b) this narrative and understanding can lead to radical ways of redefining access and the way we advocate and emphasize it in environmental work. I suggest an increase in advocacy and a more thorough analysis of the spaces that provide those opportunities for shifts in societal perception. These opportunities can be found in our connection to nature and can be supported by language. We can recognize and support the existence of a diversity of beings in nature experience, while specifically emphasizing the representation of disability. I reflect on Lajoie’s (2022) statement that:

“What matters most is not the inclusion of disabled people in ableist spaces. What matters is that we imagine modalities of sharing space that fundamentally alter relational

and belonging practices. Only on this foundation will we be able to move forward in generating access" (Lajoie, 2022, p.334).

Access is reimagining, and access is potential. The foundations of our access and emphasizing and increasing access, I suggest must be done through the use of language and redefined interpretations of the terms. Finally, the next and final portion of my discussion speaks briefly about access, inclusion, and disability in environmental education. Here I note that through the completion of the requirements of my Master in Environmental Studies Plan of Study, I have written many papers on disability and environmental education, however, they remain beyond the scope of this paper.

Access and Inclusion in Environmental Education (EE)

In the final discussion section of the paper, I want to apply the archival analysis and concept of attention to language to environmental education, as it is an essential consideration; first, by ensuring education is inclusive, and second to reinstate the importance of language in educating about the environment and nature. Throughout my program of study, I have recognized language as a cornerstone of the environmental movement and environmental education. Environmental education reflects at its core the ways we are taught and learn in nature. As a result, environmental education can have a profound impact on our attitudes and views of the world around us, as well as how we relate to one another (Running-Grass, 1995). There is a lot of promise in environmental education since it can be used to teach outside of the constraints and limitations of traditional curricula (Payne, 2020). Environmental education translates for some (myself included), as potential, and as reimagining. Examining how inaccessibility impacts our educational practices and the obstacles that exist can help us build bridges and change to become more inclusive as individuals and as a community. When we

educate more inclusively, we aim to communicate, learn from, and engage with a wide range of people, each of whom has unique viewpoints and contributions. As Kafer (2013) highlights, to better understand aspects of presence and representation, in the context of disability, there is a need to deconstruct the notions we hold of nature. Deconstructing and leaning into new notions, thus allows us to reconstruct our ways of knowing and being, opening new paths and possibilities. In the findings of the archival analysis, I want to reflect on the strength of language. Through the archival analysis, I was able to learn about the nuances of language, of both disability and inclusion and how it changes perceptions and interpretations. Using *The Spit* as the example, I was able to find definitions and terms I did not expect to see. The narratives and excerpts, along with the presence of individuals with physical disabilities, are already established in urban natural spaces. However, emphasizing language is a multidisciplinary and widely applicable mode of increasing inclusion, and creating access. Again, Lajoie (2023), eloquently outlines how in education there is the need to rethink “material and rhetorical spaces of teaching, learning, knowledge production” (p.326); and I argue it also extends to aspects of knowledge that may be deemed more informal, such as the representations you see on trail markers, signage to the educational programming, organizing and experienced in the natural world, be it in the urban context or deep wilderness. Schmidt (2021) highlights how outdoor education and informal modes of experience and learning can destabilize the hierarchy of knowledge and have the potential to possibly privilege disabled learners (p.6); which is not a common narrative within environmental education from the critical disability lens (Payne, 2020; Burns et al., 2009; Stevens, 2014). Thus, the potential for environmental education simply increases as the recognition of language, access and representation related to disability is continually reflected

upon and analyzed further. Environmental educating, informally and formally, is a possible way to reimagine disability, access, and inclusivity in urban natural settings.

Conclusion

I begin this conclusion with a question. What does disability mean in the context of archival analysis? I reflect on the portion of this paper that discusses the situation of the archives, emphasizing disability. It has quite often been the case for disabled activists, theorists, students, and teachers, that the representation of their experience, or even simply their presence remains invisible. Archival work is a profound way, I believe, to dig back deeply into the roots of inquiry. As Mikus Brilmyer (2022) states, not only is the absence of identities, experiences, and the presence of disability a common experience but there is also the “palpability of the absence of records about disability” (p.175). In developing the research and the body of work I have written to fulfill it, doing a deep archival analysis could have resulted in little to no information or representation of disability at all. Surely not enough to write a research paper. However, in my case using an example like the Spit, I am grateful to have found some profound and insightful quotations that allowed me to reflect on language and critical disability literature. I want to note that the work is never done, this research only just scratches the surface of the potential of this kind of inquiry. There are many other bodies of work and modes of research that can and ought to be done, the first being research that documents and accounts for first-hand experience of individuals with physical disabilities, in the Spit, or various urban natural examples in Toronto. At the core of this research, I have detailed the need for increased access, and incorporation of language that represents a diversity of individuals as well as the representation of disability. The Spit, I suggest, holds this abstract, messy, and complex nature, one that suits this kind of work. As a society and community, grounding research, education, informal or not, around inclusive

language, is a radical act. Reflecting the core of what the research seeks to outline, the significant potential of access, based on care and responsibility for others, for our community's diverse human, non-human, "natural" and "unnatural" alike. Entities such as the Leslie Street Spit, can serve to establish this kind of perspective, especially in urban nature spaces, since there are significantly fewer barriers already present in these cases. As I have mentioned a multitude of times throughout this work, the presence of individuals with physical disabilities in natural space is already a fact, however *emphasizing* their representation remains critical. First is the recognition that disability representation, when centralized and highlighted, can lend to reconstructing our notions of being, particularly in our relations to nature and the environment. I hope this work can serve as a jumping-off point, and further contribute to the discipline of eco-crip and associated theories that investigate the interrelations and intersectional nature of disability and environmental narratives. In thinking about who is represented, in urban places through physical infrastructure, language and education, this research has emphasized the potential of inclusivity. In such a complex and multifaceted area of inquiry, there is always more potential for investigation, in the spheres of education, media, and so much more. At the end of the day, I hope this research paper can contribute to the bigger picture. I hope it has led the reader on a journey, looking at a deeper level, into the intricacies of access, as potential, and as a new way of imagining.

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Appendix A

Box 401287 Folio 9

Name: Leslie Street Spit articles

Physical Description/Form of Records:

Content: The file consists of newspaper articles. The information relates to the current state and future development of the Leslie Street Spit.

Date: 1976- [ca. 1995]

Archival citation: Fonds 265, Series 1269, Subseries 14, File 1

Box 199071 Folio 9

Name: Tommy Thompson Park

Physical Description/Form of Records: 1 folder of textual records, Textual-administrative records

Content: The file consists of correspondence and information regarding the Leslie Street Spit.

Date: 1990

Archival Citation: Fonds 72, Series 336, File 267

Box 206390 Folio 1

Name: Clippings on the Leslie Street Spit

Physical Description/Form of Records: 1 folder of textual records, textual records

Content: The file consists of newspaper clippings and magazine articles about the Leslie Street Spit, both on its evolution as an urban wilderness and proposals to develop it.

Date: 1977-1993

Archival Citation: Fonds 1286, File 182

Box 206390 Folio 12

Name: Recreation Research Review special issue - planning for recreation and leisure on the Toronto waterfront: vol. 14, no. 2

Physical Description/Form of Records: 1 folder of textual records, textual records

Content: The file consists of a special issue of the Recreation Research Review featuring several articles on Tommy Thompson Park.

Date: 1989

Archival Citation: Fonds 1286, File 193

Box 820190 Folio 17

Name: The 1987 master plan for the Leslie Street Spit (Tommy Thompson Park) - an urban wilderness threatened

Physical Description/Form of Records: 1 folder of textual records, textual records

Content: Files consist of research and content, along with a published paper depicting the master plan of the Leslie Street Spit

Date: [ca. 1988]

Archival Citation: Fonds 1286, File 71

Box 145461 Folio 23

Name: Waterfront, Aquatic Park Steering Committee

Physical Description/ Form of Records: 1 folder of textual records, textual records
 Content: Steering committee meeting notes, public consultation and excerpts detailing waterfront development and recreational use.
 Date: 1973
 Archival Citation: Fonds 1311, Series 1197, File 158

Box 138924 Folio 20

Name: Friends of the Spit
 Physical Description/Form of Records: 1 folder of textual records, textual records
 Content: Brochures, flyers surrounding advocacy and information about the Spit, for recreation uses by the public.
 Date: 1986-1987
 Archival Citation: Fonds 1289, Series 2647, File 307

Box 255931 Folio 8

Name: Tommy Thompson Park planning
 Physical Description/Form of Records: 1 folder of textual records, textual- reports, publications- pamphlets, publications- serials- newsletters.
 Content: The file consists of material related to the proposed development of Tommy Thompson Park by the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and the opposition voiced by the Friends of the Spit organization. The file includes a January 1987 report prepared by the Friends of the Spit organization titled "Tommy Thompson Park Phase III: A Better Concept Plan."
 Date: 1987
 Archival Citation: Fonds 232, Series 775, File 109

Box 143842 Folio 4

Name: Leslie Street Spit - miscellaneous
 Physical Description/ Form of Records: 1 folder of textual records, textual records
 Content: Miscellaneous content, brochures, pamphlets, and newspaper articles all related to the Leslie Street Spit
 Date: 1983-1984
 Archival Citation: Fonds 1286, File 97

Box 143842 Folio 6

Name: Leslie Street Spit - miscellaneous
 Physical Description/ Form of Records: 1 folder of textual records, textual records
 Content: Miscellaneous content, brochures, pamphlets, and newspaper articles all related to the Leslie Street Spit
 Date: 1981-1985
 Archival Citation: Fonds 1286, File 99