Searching for Black Creek:
an experimental expedition into narrative ecotheory.

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A Major Paper submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Environmental Studies,
York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

July 31, 2017.

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the land around Black Creek, a polluted urban creek northwest of downtown Toronto. It flows above ground for some 35 kilometers from its source in the southern edge of the Oak Ridges Moraine through industrial areas and low-income neighbourhoods before its eventual confluence with the Humber River.

The paper takes the form of a narrative expedition upstream from the creek's mouth. The fictionalized author recounts layers of historical, geographical, and theoretical knowledge in an effort to develop a familiarity with the creek, to understand how it came to be as it is, and to aid in the voyage to its source. At the same time, the paper ambivalently engages with the impossibility of objective knowledge and the consequences of actions driven by anthropocentric, post-Enlightenment ideology. In an effort to overcome this, the narrator attempts to deploy a hybrid of speculative realism and vital materialism to better build an understanding of the creek, this cyborg entity.

The paper moves toward a frantic search for methods to engage with or even to understand the catastrophic anthropogenic forces which seem to have developed a life of their own—seeking their own ends without the faintest ecological concern.

Preface

This paper is what happens when I get away from coursework for a while and get repeatedly, increasingly, wonderfully lost along a cyborg urban creek.

It turns out that I'm not as interested in dealing with the intricacies of critical theory as I thought I was. I'm grateful for those that thrive in that rarified air, and I hope that the ways in which I've used or been influenced by their work is in keeping with their intent.

Something happened after I'd spent enough time meandering with Black Creek. The countless hours spent walking alongside it, exploring the lands around it, tracing others' lives near (or in) it, and occasionally falling into it shifted my interest from the abstract to something much more concrete (and only occasionally literally so). I remained drawn to theory while also being pulled toward the seething mess of the creek. I think that powerful ambivalence is evident throughout the work.

Notions of narrative and fiction kept reappearing as I walked the creek. Perhaps this was a result of the simple correlation between a walk and a story, mixed with my repeated encounters with the unknowable, the speculative, and the contingent.

My major paper is the result of my attempt to apply diverse fields of thought to a seemingly simple aim, that of familiarizing myself with Black Creek. The resultant cloud of ideas, experiments, failures, contradictions, and hopes is intended to: critique historical and current development projects in and around the Black Creek lands; convey a type of hybrid theory-fictional narrative which describes my experience of the place while never asserting that my recounting of it is authoritative; explore the function and potential of story—writ large—in shifting the ways in which we make sense of the world, in hopes of building a more humane future for humans and the diverse entities upon whom we are dependent.

Acknolwedgements

A complete list of acknowledgements would be longer than my paper, so I will have to pick a few.

First off, thanks to my close friends for their encouragement and patience with me as I struggled through this process. I'd especially like to call out Courtney Lake for her enthusiasm in coming out to the creek with me and Laura Bossio for insisting on regular Black Creek photography updates. And I guess I should mention Duff McCourt for going for a one run day and finding a weird concrete trench that he thought I'd like. Of course I'd also like to say thanks to my partner and partner in academic purgatory, Rachel Freedman Stapleton. Thank you for sustenance, for support, for always being willing to talk shop, and for being my organizational patronus.

At York, this paper could never have taken form without Cate Sandilands and her course, Culture and the Environment. Thanks to her as well for guidance when I was just starting out at FES. Thanks as well to Liette Gilbert and Chris Cavanagh who were always willing to talk me down. Lastly, were it not for Peter Timmerman keeping me on track and nudging me forward I would probably still be trying to write a perfect second chapter.

I would be amiss if I didn't also acknowledge the absent and the distant. The woods out behind my childhood home, even if they're slowly shifting from the boreality I remember and the current owner has put up an *ugly* fence. My mother for inculcating me with excitement and confidence out in the woods and my father for the dubious gift of anxiety. Without that strange mix none of this would be possible.

All photographs by author.

Maps illustrated by author using maps from www.openstreetmap.org.

Illustrated maps use StarRaven's Sketchy Cartography Brushes, found at http://starraven.deviantart.com/art/Sketchy-Cartography-Brushes-198264358

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Introduction

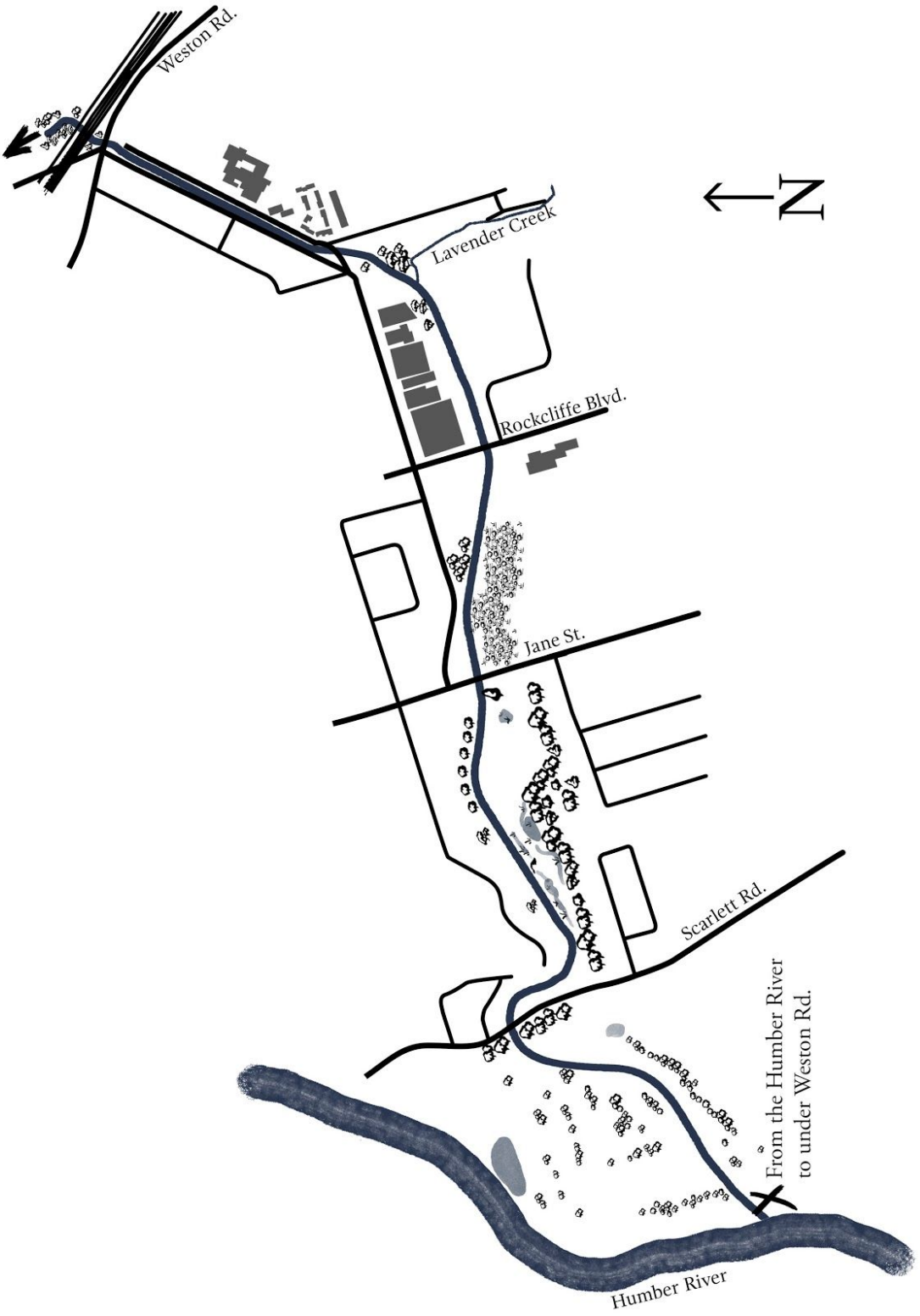
What follows is a recounting of a journey. The route takes us along Black Creek from its confluence with the Humber River up to its northern reaches near Weston & Rutherford Rds. Seen on a map, Black Creek is represented as a little blue line. I follow this crooked line—the aboveground creek—and in doing so, trace another—the route which we take in exploring the stream and its environs.

However, to think of either of these things as a simple line is a serious misapprehension. In sketching the line contained herein, my hand is guided by many forces: personal history and preference, ecotheory, contemporary philosophy, anxiety, aesthetics; access to a car, ability and predilection to walk long distances, being able to do so with only minimal fear of harassment or reprisal, support from a small network of friends; the unique character of water, historical weather events, local geology, glaciation, widely-held beliefs about nature, folks who like to build forts and bridges. This list is perforce incomplete, but it provides some sense of the disparate actors who have helped shape this voyage.

While writing, walking, or thinking, I've often found myself unsure of how to proceed: either due to distraction, indecision, or confusion. This should be unsurprising in an endeavour with as many diverse, self-interested stakeholders as I mentioned above. To overcome this difficulty, I usually sought out paths worn by others. This process of search and discovery has both brought me closer to my goal and led me astray. Walking a sidewalk over a bridge and following a game trail tell you different things and only sometimes arrive at the same place.

Given this method, I occasionally found myself well and truly lost. The only way to proceed was to forge my own path with what I had on hand. This is a messy, uncertain practice, and it's entirely possible that thin trail which I labouriously cut is paralleled by a freeway that's just out of sight. This process too—and its concomitant uncertainty, superfluity, sweat and scratches—have shaped the line as well: a tremble in my hand or a break in its continuity.

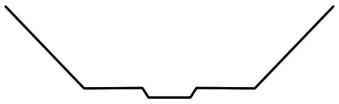
This is an experimental engagement with a complicated place. I attempt to look for Black Creek; walking its length over the course of a year. In it, many things are found, and some just won't stay lost.


Weston Rd.
Lavender Creek
N
Rockcliffe Blvd.
Jane St.
Scarlett Rd.
From the Humber River
to under Weston Rd.
Humber River

1. From the Humber River to under Weston Road.

It's early morning, mid-August. The air is wet, and heavy with the scents of dank river mud and fresh-cut grass. The sound of flowing water mixes with intermittent birdsong: distant staccato chirps and the quacking of nearby ducks. A pair of loud synthetic buzzes rise and fall, cut through with a staticky chatter.

You're standing on a flat, rough concrete slab. The one you're on is one of many, arranged to form a broad ditch which vanishes into the distance around a long, slow corner. If you were to look at it in cross-section, it would look vaguely like this:



That notch at the bottom, right next to where you're standing, cradles a fast-flowing stream of clear water. The grey, sloping walls are topped with unruly shrubs and a few small trees. Further up the channel, this scruff tapers off and is replaced with open air. You can't make anything out from where you are now, standing at the bottom of this pale stone channel.

As you cast your gaze around, you notice a close, splashing churn. Immediately behind you the strip of water tumbles off a low ledge and pours into a broad river. It's maybe forty metres from bank to bank but the river seems shallow, split as it is by a wide bar of gravel. The far bank looks like parkland: paved paths, signage, guardrails, picnic tables, a few people walking dogs.

I arrive, perhaps a little late. I stumble in through the brush along the edge of the channel, carefully managing the transition from rough earth to sloping concrete. I'm quite tall, with pale skin darkened to a pinkish tan; short brown hair and a scruffy beard, shot with white; slightly crooked glasses, a pair of sturdy-looking wellies, a well-worn t-shirt, synthetic trousers and a day pack. The pitch of the slope requires small steps and I place my feet carefully, finding purchase on the tufts of grass that sprout from between two slabs. Most of the way down, though, a tuft comes loose. I slip a little, but then manage a mostly-controlled run down the slope, coming to a stop at the bottom.

I chuckle a little, shaking off my startling descent. "Hello! I'm glad you could make it." I extend my hand towards you. "My name's Max."

I continue after the handshake—my hand dry and a little callused. "So, we're here, standing next to Black Creek, right where it stops being Black Creek and merges with the flow of the Humber River. We're also—obviously—standing on concrete. We're surrounded by Lambton Mills Golf and Country Club. We're about as far west as you can get while remaining in old Toronto: a city with a metropolitan area of some 6 million people. We're also in the ancestral territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River.

"We're here today for Black Creek. I've been trying to get to know it for a while, now. After so many trips to see so many different parts of it, in all sorts of weather, throughout the year, I thought it made some sort of sense to take a... *classic* approach. Take a page out of Marlow's book, pull a Stanley and Livingstone... but with less imperialism. Or at least no *more* imperialism. I want to make a proper expedition of it, just to see what happens.

"The difference from those famed expeditions is that I've already been to the creek's headwaters. I've walked nearly every metre of this stream. We're not looking for the fountain of youth, a city of gold, nothing that hasn't already been measured, surveyed, divvied up into lots, put into Google maps. Rather than trying to find something new, I hope that our trip will *be* the thing that we find. We'll make something that wasn't here before.

"This 'something' I'm talking about? I figure that it will be made of at least three other things." I tick them off my fingers as I talk. "First, an understanding and appreciation of this place, *as it is*, right now. It's easy to yearn for some perfect, archetypal stream—bushes heavy with edible berries, jumping fish, children frolicking in clean water blanketed in the soothing shade of stout trees—but much harder to try and see a place for how it is. Second, I hope that we'll make some sort of story, and that its telling will do something too. Lastly, this is an experiment, a trial, an attempt to study a place in an ungainly, impractical, and inefficient manner. I have my reasons for doing this… but I have no idea if it will work!

"So, I guess I'm inviting you on this walk, this little adventure, in order to help make that story. If one wanted to see all of Black Creek—and I definitely do—it seems only logical to walk its entire length. To do so, I figured we'd start at one end or the other. To begin at its end feels appropriate, somehow. To work against the current; to walk along with it until we find its source.

"Even though I expect we'll get to know this stream, I wish that I could get to know *you*. Both for the simple enjoyment of getting to know somebody, but also so I could try and focus on the parts of this trek that you might be most interested in, instead of only dwelling on those that fascinate me. Maybe you're a close friend, and have come along out of interest. Perhaps you're an instructor of mine, and you're here as part of your job, be you begrudging, intrigued, or anywhere else in between. Or perhaps you live in one of the neighbourhoods along the creek and you're interested in finding out about that weird little stream. Or you've never even been to the city and are interested in overlooked places. Regardless, I'm so glad you could make it.

"And since you're still here—whoever you are—and we have a long ways to go..." I gesture upstream expansively. "Shall we?"

We take our first step, out of the shade cast by the dense bushes growing on the lip of the channel. Overhead other than a low lip of grass that lines channel rim there is just an expanse of cloudless sky. It's already *hot*. The sun is a blinding white disc, cutting through the faint

red-brown haze of a urban summer day. A few scattered trees, standing alone or in pairs, dot the earth on either of the bare trench as it recedes into the distance. The trees seem taller than they should be, standing isolated as they are.

"I'm glad nobody's called security on us. You see, I spoke with the course superintendent to get an okay before walking through here, but it's not as if he was going to post a memo." I make air quotes, crooking my fingers: "'Please try not to brain anybody walking along the creek with an errant drive.'" I cough a half-laugh. "The number of people who asked me, 'Do you need any help?' on my way to meet you. Hah. What a truly *helpful* bunch. Except that was a polite way of demanding 'what are you doing here?'

"Frankly, it's not a feeling I'm used to having, this feeling of not-belonging, of 'not-supposed to be here'. Though I'm sure that the things that usually insulate me from that," I gesture vaguely at my body, one hand waving down my torso, then both out, flicking hands out, tada, "probably helped me here, too. Maybe that's why I got the *polite* interrogation."

The Black Creek flows silent in its channel here. It's well-maintained, free of any debris, save for the occasional golf ball, resting in a divot, building up a tail of sand and silt in its miniscule lee. We follow the water in silence for a while, punctuated only by an occasional *tok* of a club hitting a ball. It's not long before we reach the line of trees that marks the eastern extent of the course. The creek bends here again, vanishing under a bridge made of bleached concrete and steel.

Here the creek acts up a little. There's a drop in the channel of at least a few feet. It is pitched slightly before that, and it tightens slightly to feed the water momentum, sending it rioting off into the air. The water aerosolizes, and we breathe it in unavoidably. This soft tumult mixes with the noise above. The wide flat bridge, reinforced with massive steel beams speaks to us of its business; *russssh*, low bassy hisses punctuated with paired thunks—tires skipping over road seams.

"We're under Scarlett Road. Named after John Scarlett—miller, businessman, slave owner—who owned over a thousand acres around here in the early 1800's. He lived on an estate around here, which he dubbed Runnymede, probably after a water-meadow west of London.[1] There's another major street that bears that name, southeast of here. Funny how all these folks

[1] **Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, s.v. "Runnymede." Accessed April 20, 2017. The original Runnymede is the most likely location of the sealing of the Magna Carta.**

showed up, acquired land, named it all, and then got more things named after them for doing such a good job of naming land in the first place.

"Most of the land, the roads, the buildings, the infrastructure of the city is painted over with the materials and words of European colonizers. I'm fascinated by the pieces of the city which persist. Those places which seem to still—through some form of recalcitrance—bear a semblance to their original form.

"Well, *original* meaning 'since the last glaciation', I suppose. The land here has been sculpted by repeated glaciations, the most recent of which—the Wisconsinan—reached its furthest extent roughly 24,000-21,000 years ago. If the ground is flattish, it's because we're nowhere near a tectonic boundary, and if it's flatter yet, it's because of glaciers. The huge swath of flat land upon which downtown Toronto is built was once the bottom of a lake. That lake is still there as Lake Ontario but is about fifty meters shallower than it was as the glacial meltwater filled its basin.[2]

"If the broad strokes of Toronto's topography were painted by massive ice sheets, the fine detail has since been filled in by the work of four major rivers and numerous smaller creeks and streams, cutting into the earth, mostly soft clay, sand, gravel: and layers of glacial till. If you were looking at the city from above, from west to east across the Greater Toronto Area, these rivers are the Credit, the Humber, the Don, and the Rouge. These are still open rivers. They're polluted, they're impinged upon by urban development at every turn, but they still—largely—look like I think a river should look: wide and winding, in valleys filled with trees, fish, rocks, marshes. Now as for most of the smaller waterways, the ones which ran closer to where the modern city grew? They were not so fortunate.

"If you're familiar with Toronto, you'll know the area around Casa Loma is unusually topographically exciting. I picked that spot both because the men who built Lambton originally had a club around there, *and* because it's shot through with tiny waterways. Garrison Creek, Castle Frank Brook, and Taddle Creek all sculpted the land around there. The area is rife with hills and ravines, cut into the sprawling east-west ridge just south of there—the former shore of glacial Lake Iroquois. All this varying topography must have played a role in attracting these golfers to those particular farmers' fields.

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[2] **D. R. Sharpe, "Quaternary Geology of Toronto and Surrounding Area." Toronto, ON: Ontario Geological Survey, 1980.**

"Unlike Black Creek, these waterways were too close to the core of the city, they were too small, and the expansion of the city hit them at the wrong time.[3] So they encountered that fate met by so many urban creeks: they were entombed. Encased in a sewer for the sheer impudence of flooding occasionally, for becoming health hazards after having been filled with waste and sewage, and for the most serious offence: generally being in the way.

"We're fortunate enough to still be above ground, here, though obviously…" I cast my hands around at the brutal, angular trench we've been walking along, "...there is something deeply… uh, *infrastructural* about this part of the creek. Not an underground sewer but not quite what I think of when I think 'stream', either."

We carry on, further along the 'stream'. Here the creek bends in an improbable angle, a sharp right-hand hairpin. On our left looms a massive concrete retaining wall. Its full height—at the apex of the stream's curve—is hard to gauge, lost as it is in a shaggy tangle of false virginia creeper. It feels secluded here, doubly so after the open glare of the criss-crossing fairways. The bottom six feet of the wall is dense with both graffiti and painted-over-graffiti: a back and forth between kids with spraycans and city workers with rollers.

The land on both sides of the creek opens up. To our left loom tall willows, and there's a thin strip of grass between the concrete and a row of backyard fences. To the right lies a forested ridge, and at the base of that, a series of quiet, green, swampy ponds, bisected by a road that gives automobile access to the park. It wasn't that long ago that this place was very different.

"Instead of a quiet park, filled with the distant playful shrieks of children swimming in the public pool and soft *quorks* from frogs and ducks, the land was torn up by heavy machinery, extracting gravel and sand to satisfy the paving needs of a burgeoning city. While much of the land in the valley was left to woods and creek, the areas to the south and north—along the ravine slopes—were thoroughly excavated. The park still bears the name of the quarry's owner, Conn Smythe (as does a prestigious professional hockey trophy). Smythe purchased the land and entered into a business partnership with Frank Angotti, owner of a local paving company, a business which would thrive during the rapid expansion of the city following World War II.[4] The slow transition of this place from forest to oak savannah to farmland to gravel pit to public park was driven by a long history of human habitation and witnessed, over the millennia, by the creek

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[3] Max Meyer, "Swimming Against the Current: A Political Ecology of Toronto's Garrison Creek and Black Creek" (Coursework, York University, 2015), 12-16.

[4] Conn Smythe and Scott Young, *Conn Smythe: If You Can't Beat 'em in the Alley* (Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), 235.

as it flowed steadily by. This sandy ridge, a quirk of glacial geography, made possible many of the phenomena unique to this area.

"The thin sandy soil allowed for the development of oak savannah, a unique human-shaped biome developed by indigenous people and maintained, by regular burning, for thousands of years. The poor soil and the reduction of undergrowth by fire allowed species to thrive here that would normally be displaced by the succession processes in an undisturbed Carolinian forest. It also made for excellent hunting. Despite sprawling over large areas across what is now Toronto, the savannah has almost all vanished, either buried under the spread of the city or disappeared due to the lack of indigenous land care practices.[5]

"The quarry existed here due to the gravel deposition as well, though there is a telling difference between working with the land to provide food and habitat for people, for plants, and for nonhuman animals and tearing it apart to produce concrete and asphalt. Along with the massive infrastructure project that channelized this part of Black Creek, some of the land which had been so extensively quarried was covered with new residential subdivisions: some of which

[5] Jon Johnson, "Significant Indigenous Sites in High Park" (presentation at Technoscience Salon, Toronto, On, September 30, 2016.

Smythe built to house veterans from World War II.[6] Some of the former quarry was converted to parkland. A decade later, this new parkland was further changed. A series of connected ponds and streams were built, which both provide habitat and function to retain and treat water before it eventually flows into creek." Ahead of us, a trickle of that water pours out of a drain and flows down the side of the channel, painting a broad, inverted V in slimy algae. We walk through it gingerly, leaving tread-prints in the muck.

"This approach—the development of wetlands to help manage stormwater—was innovative at the time. A few decades earlier, a markedly different decision was made to help control flooding along Black Creek, and we're standing in it right now. Before I keep on with all this history, do you want to take a seat somewhere? We might as well conserve our energy."

I lead you up out of the channel, the footing a little perilous in our algae-covered shoes. On a small rise stands a park bench, next to a thin birch tree. It casts a little shade in which we can sit. From the hummock, you can make out the lay of the ponds, ringed with reeds, their surfaces deep, green-black mirrors.

"On October 15th, 1954, a storm which had originated somewhere off the coast of Grenada hit Toronto. Meteorologists had been expecting it to fizzle out as it traveled so far north, but it was reinvigorated by the warm, moist air over Lake Ontario. While most of downtown slept through what seemed like just another bad thunderstorm, the northwest of the city was hammered by torrential rain.

"The storm in itself was exceptional, but it was only part of the problem. The land around Toronto had seen bad weather for thousands of years, but other recent circumstances made for a dangerous combination. The rain interacted with an increased human population, urban encroachment upon waterways, and the accompanying increase of impermeable ground cover—roofs, roads, parking lots, sidewalks. This resulted in massive flooding along Black Creek and the Humber River. Eighty-one people died and the city suffered tens of millions of dollars in damage.

"Following this, local authorities decided that something had to be done. What precisely that something would entail was an open question, then as now. In order to determine a course of action, four regional conservation authorities were amalgamated to form the Metropolitan

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[6] Conn Smythe and Scott Young, *Conn Smythe: If You Can't Beat 'em in the Alley* **(Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), 184.**

Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. After a pro-austerity conservative provincial government amalgamated Toronto and its suburbs in 1998, the organization lost its 'metropolitan' and is now colloquially known as the TRCA.

"Conditions along Black Creek had long been a concern, and so the first of the TRCA's flood-control projects was the construction of a retardation dam at Downsview Dells Park, completed in 1960. In addition to these large infrastructure projects, the TRCA also acquired huge swaths of land around waterways across the city, in order to regulate development in areas which are at risk of flooding. By the mid-1970s, the TRCA owned 78% of Toronto's nearly eight thousand acres of parkland.[7]

"As the years progressed, various factors—from the exigencies of local politics to technical innovation—shifted the TRCA's mandate from flood control to watershed management. Despite that shift, much of the work that had been slated to be done along Black Creek had already been completed: some 7.2 kilometers of concrete channel along its southern reaches.[8]

"I usually describe it as being 'like the LA River, but smaller'. If they're not familiar with it, then I usually reference that scene from Terminator 2, where Arnie rescues a young Edward Furlong, fleeing a Mack truck driven by a murderous liquid metal robot. The point of all this river engineering is: to increase channel capacity, so the stream can hold more water when it needs to; to increase the flow rate, so water flows through more quickly; and to reduce shoreline erosion, keeping the stream in place, reducing meanders and sediment load and shoreline trees collapsing into the water. In short, when there's too much water, the channel is designed to get as much of it as possible out of here, and too much silt or mud or the crown of a willow stuck in the creek is going to cause some *problems*. Of course, getting it out of here means it has to end up somewhere else. In this case, that 'somewhere else' is the Humber River, thus increasing erosion there, and moving more polluted surface water—full of salt, litter, fertilizers, herbicides, petroleum products—into that river, and then on into Lake Ontario."

The sparse shade that the young birch was affording us has shifted along with the sun. A slight breeze flits by, carrying with it a whiff of something foul. "Oh, yeah, right. This hill is here

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[7] **Richard White,** *Planning Toronto: The Planners, The Plans, Their Legacies, 1940-80* **(Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2015), 125.**

[8] **Chris Bilton, "Storm Warning: Hurricane Hazel and the Evolution of Flood Control in Toronto," in** *HTO: Toronto's Water from Lake Iroquois to Lost Rivers to Low-Flow Toilets***, eds. Wayne Reeves and Christina Palassio (Toronto, ON: Coach House Books, 2008), 88-89.**

because we're on top of a sanitary sewer. It doesn't seem like a great place to put a bench, does it?

"Before we go, a word about these sewers. The water quality in the creek along here is often abysmal; many of the sewers around here are 'combined', meaning that they function both as storm and sanitary sewers. While these function adequately in dry conditions, the sewers flood during heavy rains. This stirs up all their contents and it all gushes out into the creek."[9] I make a face. "Anyway, let's get going. It stinks here and I'd like to get out of the sun."

We walk along the sere park lawns for a ways, wending between the marshy ponds. Ahead to our right is a fenced-in turquoise swimming pool surrounded by an empty parking lot. The pool is full of young kids, shouting and playing in the shimmering water. They're watched by their parents—some bobbing in the water, some sitting on the deck—and a tanned teenager sitting on a lifeguard chair, an open beach umbrella strapped to it with zipties. We pass a rusted metal footbridge which guides our gazes to the northern side of the creek. Two baseball

[9] Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, "Humber River State of the Watershed Report - Surface Water Quality," 2008, accessed June 16, 2017, http://www.trca.on.ca/dotAsset/50153.pdf.

diamonds sit empty in the midday heat, partially obscured by a regular row of matching, towering willows. A distant din of white noise makes its way to us on the breeze.

I lead us up a narrow dirt trail, lined by bushes and a chainlink fence; the racket grows steadily louder. I have to stoop here, clearing the heavy summer growth pressing in from overhead. You can make out only the tiniest glimpses of the creek below, but it's doing something to produce that now-loud roar. Ahead, you see me stop in my tracks, muttering under my breath. I reach up and delicately free myself from a weave of branches, covered in small, needle-like spines.

"Mind these. They—ow—really get a good hold on clothes." I wince. "And skin." After I'm safely extricated we walk the remaining few paces of the trail before it perpendiculars at an awkwardly steep incline. Below us, Black Creek is rushing out from a massive, semi-circular tunnel, and crashing onto scattered stones below. The tunnel mouth is recessed a little, and feels like an amphitheatre, us standing stage left. The channel here is wide, rough, sketched in with stone blocks rather than the expanse of concrete to which we've grown accustomed.

Walking tentatively on wet concrete we approach the tiny waterfall. Standing by the torrent, we pause and take the place in: the looming tunnel behind us, the enveloping crash of the creek pouring off the drop, the trees and vines hanging overhead, the muffled noise of a city bus passing by on the road overhead. After a few minutes, I speak again, voice raised. "This used to all be concrete trapezoid, at least until 1992. All of this built channel needs regular maintenance to keep it working as intended. Water sneaks in everywhere, salt corrodes rebar and pipes, opportunist seeds wedge into cracks and grow, exerting steady pressure that can split concrete and stopper drains. Every few years sections of the channel need clearing, plants uprooted, damage repaired, and so forth. Hearing about some upcoming maintenance here, the now defunct Black Creek Conservation Project lobbied the TRCA to replace this section with stone, partially renaturalizing the channel.[10]

"I'm no expert in stream ecology, but I imagine it must have had some impact, at least right here. This is one of the few places in the southern channel that I've seen anything in the creek other than furtive minnows. A friend once pointed out a big crayfish here, clinging to a rock, just above the water. Though, I should add, she had to point it out about four times before I saw the darn thing. I'd never seen one before. Funny how you can't see something right in

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[10] Black Creek Project. "Past Projects and Programs of the BCCP." accessed October 03, 2016, http://bccp.ca/PastProjects.html.

front of your face if you don't know what you're looking for, huh?"

We walk through the tunnel and pass under Jane Street. We're surrounded by huge murals in brilliant colours, popping and bubbling in their exaggerated forms. The concrete of the tunnel is cracked in many places, the cracks seeping with decades of dissolved minerals. These build up little terraced heaps, the minerals slick and stone-hard once again. On the far side, the tunnel opens up into a vacant, sloping field. It's covered in grasses, shifting imperceptibly in the midday summer fug. An asphalt path switchbacks up the slope to Jane St, next to an apartment tower that overlooks the valley. The path is intermittently dotted with weathered lumber birdhouses installed on rusting metal posts.

Around the eventual curve of the channel, we startle a large black cat that was hunkered down behind a knot of grass growing up between two concrete slabs. It lopes ahead of us, half-casual. The cat stops, regards us for a moment, then makes a decision: leaping over the eight foot span of water in a long, easy arc, then scampers up the opposite slope and disappears into the underbrush.

After a little while we pass by a middle school, dead quiet now in the middle of summer, its playing fields untended and slightly shaggy. There's a moment's respite under the Rockcliffe Blvd. bridge, having a drink of water while enjoying the shade. Cool, damp air wafts out of a grated drain under the bridge; I make use of it as air conditioning. Thus fortified, we head out once more into the oppressive heat. Before continuing upstream, I lead us up, out of the channel, over the road bridge, and back down to the northern side: an indirect route required for those who lack the easy athleticism of a feral cat. There's a spray of young trees between us and the warehouses to our left, and nothing much of anything on our right: scraggly lawn, a fenced-off municipal works compound, and a line of distant houses that slowly recedes up the ravine's southern slope.

Before long, it becomes clear why I had us switch to the northern side of the stream. We pass by the confluence with Lavender Creek; there's a wash of effluvium, dark and sickly, that coats the concrete where Lavender spills into Black. The mingling waters carry a faint whiff of bad meat and plasticky aerosol. "Try as I might, I couldn't find out how Lavender Creek got its name, so I'm hesitant to rule out cruel irony. It runs underground for kilometers, its unusual route leading it west-southwest from its source. Lavender has the misfortune of emerging just west of Weston Road, between a line of garages and machine shops to the north and a row of abattoirs and meat-packers to the south. Apparently it's less polluted than it used to be, but I can't help but wonder what's still lurking in the water."

A steady northward curve passes through a lightly forested section, then the trench walls begin to rise around us, under a pair of road bridges that span the deepening gap. We step carefully over decaying metal and concrete bars which jut from the broadening channel floor. The metal is on the upstream edge of each rectangular slab, clearly placed to protect the concrete from impact and wear. This metal armour is, in a few places, torn from its rusted moorings and twisted askew. I pause for a moment and tentatively kick the damaged metal; it barely moves.

"I have this odd confusion whenever I see something like this. Wrenched and twisted steel; massive sections of pipes and sewer outfalls lying detached from their moorings; even chairs and mattresses that are there one month and gone the next. Especially on a day like today, multiplied by all the other times I've walked this channel with the creek flowing gently by. It's as

if, well, I know that floods happen, and that they're powerful, destructive, dangerous. But at the same time I don't *know* it. My experience of Black Creek is this placid strip of water. How could it possibly do all these things?"

Ahead, further confusing evidence. Grey walls rise straight up, maybe five meters high. These sheer concrete walls are crowned with beleaguered chain-link fences, uneven and browned with age. Scrubby road-edge plants poke their heads through the fence and gaze down on us silently as we walk past, stupefied in the dead summer air. It's even worse down here, I imagine. The air is syrupy and motionless; I'm sweating heavily, though my sweat does little to help.

It feels different down here, walking along the bottom of this deep box trench, somehow simultaneously hidden and exposed. The sky overhead is a steep trapezoid: its sloped sides the messy fences, the small horizontal connector the bridge of Weston Road far to the north. At regular intervals small pipes dot the wall, splashes of colour and low growths of moss and slime issue forth, tracing the average shape of this month's runoff. The walls are a patchwork of graffiti and coverup paint, a range of grays that each badly fail to match the colour of the

cement. A badly flaking mural underneath a footbridge stands out. The mural is split in two, clearly intended to be taken in by passersby on the bridge: not for drivers on the roads that frame the trench, and definitely not for anyone down into the channel.

The painting depicts a range of people, all getting along in an urban setting. There's a young man kneeling to pet a dog, an elderly Black man sitting on a bench while a passing Asian schoolkid waves hello. A child with a big afro ties his shoes while a spiky haired punk rocker helpfully gives directions to a middle-aged man. There's even a mouse and a elephant sharing a piece of cheese. This scene is set in front of a tall concrete wall, rendered in the same once-clean cartoony lines. The wall is crested with grass, and rolling green hills are dotted with cute purple houses while a recognizable interpretation of the Toronto skyline fills in the horizon.

"It's easy to snark on the naivety of the message, but it was the contrast of this worn-out mural with the active suppression of graffiti around it that I found telling. Nobody's doing anything to restore or replace this little mural, but resources can evidently be found to erase the work of folks who take matters into their own hands."

The wall we've been following jogs slightly inwards, narrowing the channel and obscuring our view ahead. We can't see what's ahead but we can definitely hear it: another steady roar, opened and abstracted by hard, reflective surfaces: concrete, steel, the water of the creek. We're forced to wade a little, the sure footing to which we've grown accustomed is suddenly, shockingly slick. We careful pick each step, pinched between a sickly dribble spurting out of a clogged, barred drainpipe and deeper water that would crest our short boots and fill them with creek.

We round the small bend, and are bathed in the blessed shade of Weston Rd. Down here, hidden from view, the graffiti murals are safe from whomever is charged with erasing them. So, the walls are again bright with colours, illustrations, cryptic glyphs *almost* legible to the layperson. Between—and—over these psychedelic bursts are scrawled dozens of tags in black paint and fat marker. This gallery is subject to the creek—to constant moisture, mould, mosses, wear and flooding—but it gives the channel walls a lovely patina. Above us is a broad ceiling, all steel, cement, pigeon shit, and murky shadow. This mess holds up six lanes of traffic, two medians, two sidewalks, an indeterminate and constantly-varying number of cars, and happens to shelter us from the punishing midday heat. It's not often that I get to be sheltered by a road.

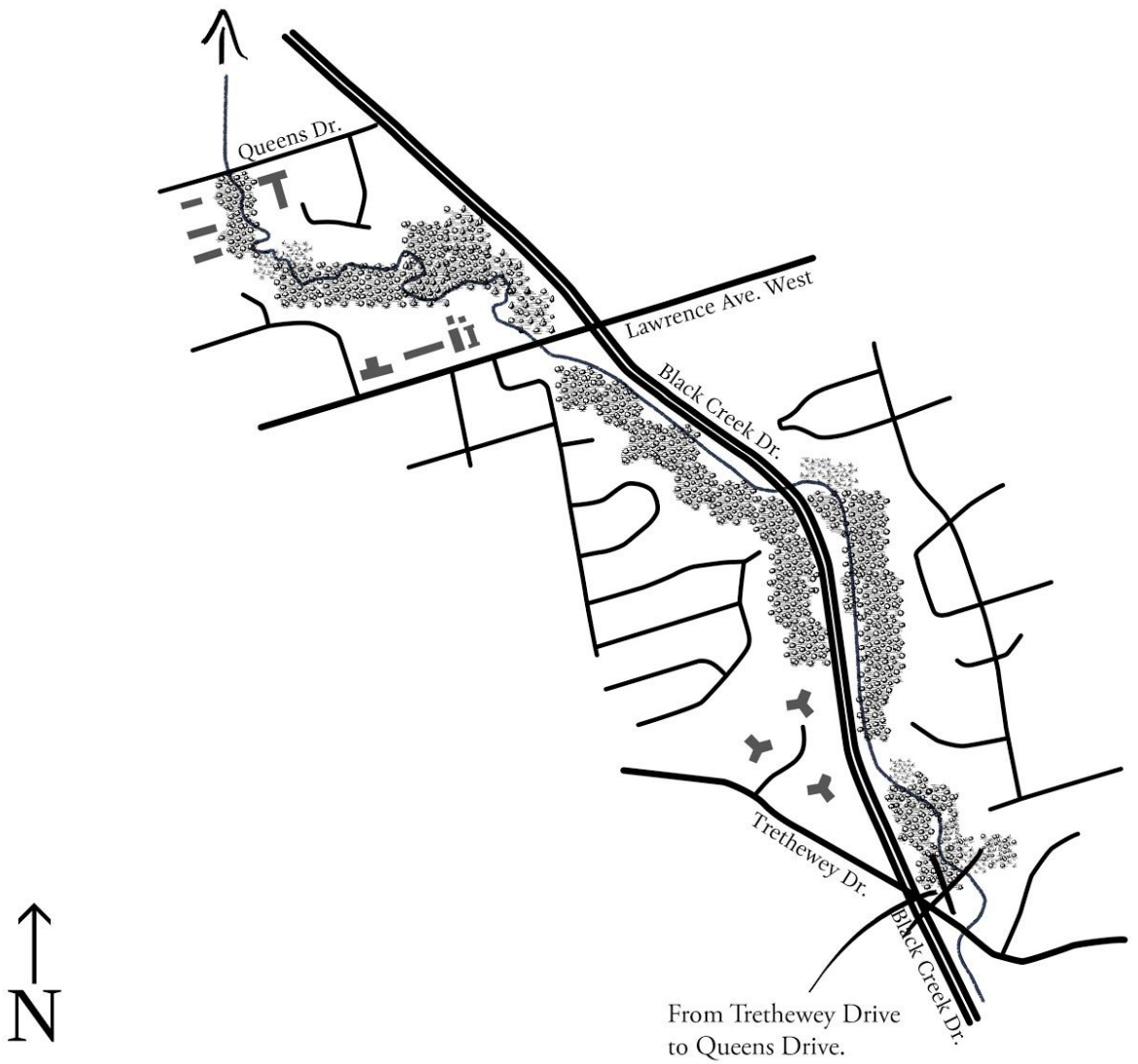
"Maybe it's the cool, the ambiance, the high ceiling, but there's something of a cathedral here. No stained glass, no lancet arches, no apses, no nave, instead we've got stained murals, boxy supports for the railroad bridges ahead. And I can't help but think that this space was built to honour its builders—or perhaps the materials with which it was built—with only a single central pew for supplicant waters."

Ahead of us, where an altar would stand, is brilliant daylight again. A doubled ledge over which the creek pours; first two feet then three. The view ahead is framed by two stout rail bridges, beige-painted minimalist stelae supporting a dark metal deck. Constricting perspective sketches out a square tunnel through which the creek flows. Into this, a drunken scrum of summer foliage tumbles down the sloping sides of the ravine, bouncing off the bridge supports, spilling heedlessly into the filthy creek. Because we've chosen to, we chase that vanishing point, scrambling up the slimy-slick ledges then carefully picking our way over scattered rocks, caked with tired litter.

We press on through the dense woods, over the slippery, uneven rocks. When we finally find a road—spanning Black Creek on a new bridge—we're both eager to take it. "I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted," I say. My appearance backs that up. My hair is lank with sweat, arms sketched with scratches, shoulders slumped. "It'll be all I can do to manage a shower before bed.

"Tell ya what. Let's meet back here soon, some day we're both free, and we can get off to an early start. There's a little park upstream that would make for a good jumping-off point."

I think I see you nod.



From Trethewey Drive
to Queens Drive.

2. From Trethewey Drive to Queens Drive.

The sun is peeking through the thinning foliage above Black Creek, off to the east. The turf grass is wet with dew, and the air carries a hint of sharpness that murmurs relief from the brutally hot summer we've had. I can *just* see my breath.

I got to the park too early and so plunk myself down at a picnic table. The park is just a little wedge of grass with a few scattered trees and a set of plastic playground equipment all bright in primary colours. From above, the place would look like a wobbly triangle, bordered on two sides by rushing traffic and on the third by a wall of trees. While I wait, a few cars come and go from the park's oversized lot. Most disgorge people. Children run to the play structure while parents follow leisurely. Dogs are walked. Some vehicles sit there for a curiously long time with their engines idling. The figures inside are obscured by reflections and shadow; I can only spy traces of movement.

You arrive on time; I've enjoyed the moment to sit. You join me at the table for a spell. We sit opposite each other, chatting and sharing stories. I almost feel like I'm getting to know you—I don't, I can't, of course—but it's pleasant to pretend.

We lose track of time. Suddenly, with a half-rueful smile, I realize that we need to get moving if we're ever going to make it to the source. We stand and stretch, shaking our limbs out, readying ourselves for another leg of the journey.

We return to the woods, crossing the now-broad creek—it's maybe twenty feet across—via a sturdy footbridge. Though sturdy, its wooden slats are slick with dew, with moss, with the creek's slow breath, and despite having been here countless times, I still half-slide, half-stumble to the dirt path on the opposite shore. This time we take the left fork, upstream.

The Black Creek Conservation Project's kingfisher logo adorns a large white sign. It's weathered, but still easily legible. It's off to the side of the path, designating this place "Trethewey Park Wetland", and thanking various people and organizations for their support. I'm thankful for the sign. To even notice the few large, shallow, tiered pools here is difficult; to imagine that they were built to purpose would be impossible.

"I got in touch with the BCCP about this project, and they were kind enough to dig up an old report. It was built in 1993, in cooperation with the TRCA and the provincial and municipal governments. While the documents were incomplete—the figures lost to time—it was

fascinating to see the hint of how much coordination would be necessary to build this small wetland. To see the list of ingredients: "black maple, 6; red maple, 12; silky dogwood, 25; grey dogwood, 10; red osier dogwood, 10; black ash, 10…". How much effort, how much energy it takes for us to recreate in months a simulacrum of a thing that might otherwise be slowly built over centuries."[11]

"Here, we have this sign," I knock on the wood—it feels hollow, "and we have the kind folks who worked for the BCCP who furnished me with documents. The rest of the land around the creek, well, it requires a lot more guesswork to attempt to read."

We walk on as I continue speaking. The trail parallels the creek closely here; we step over a rill, water pouring from the engineered wetlands to our right. "I could do more to learn to read Black Creek, but it would never be enough. The countless masteries required—botany, hydrology, engineering, human geography, cultural anthropology, local history, urban planning, political science, to name a few—could get me closer to a complete picture of this place. Instead, I've decided to approach it from a different direction."

The trail here wends around the rotted-through stump of a recently fallen birch, then we must climb over another. We pass a blaze: a piece of red Coroplast tied to a low-hanging branch with plastic twine. Our view opens up as we approach the water, shallow here, noisily tumbling over a rocky bed. On the far bank stands the park we just left with a late morning rush of traffic seething by in the background.

"Rather than seek perfect knowledge of this place, I'm coming at it from a place of intentional naïvety. Guesswork, stories, extrapolation, and—likely—being wholly wrong on occasion: these are the tools I'm deploying to try and understand the creek and its place in the city. My hope is that by approaching this place slowly and tentatively—but tenaciously—I can leave enough space open for it to exist as it is; rather than my approaching it with preconceptions as to how I think it *should* be. I keep thinking of that crayfish. I thought that crayfish were little, like an inch long. My—mistaken—preconception made the actual thing invisible to me.

"It seems only right to approach Black Creek like this. It has been subject to so many human demands and expectations in the past hundred years, many of them harmful or unreasonable. The catch—one of many—is that it has been changed and changed again by these

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[11] **Black Creek Project, "BCP Report 1992-1995 (excerpt)", 1995.**

demands, and now is very different from how it has been for most of its existence. I do not know how Black Creek *should* be. Perhaps that's something we'll find along the way, but in order to do so, I think we first need to find out how it *is*."

We're standing in the middle of a broad, tall clearing. Black Creek swoops around us, guided by its channel around the toe of land upon which we're standing. There're some low shrubs and tall grasses that grab at our ankles, but not much of an understory; either dissuaded by the sandy soil or washed away by regular floods. Still there are massive, stock-straight trees here: maples, willows, the odd elm. They weave a tattered, month-eaten canopy far above our heads. Each gust of wind tears a few new holes, sending yellowing leaves flitting down on us. The creek flows by unceasing, while the muffled rhythm of highway-speed traffic ebbs and flows somewhere behind the trees on the far bank. We leave the grove, trekking up a steep incline, following a trail worn by many shoes over many years, scuffing loose rocks, turning roots into convenient steps. The trail bends to follow the creek at the crest of the hill, a few feet short of a privacy fence at the edge of someone's back yard. A chewed up sign warns us against trespassing, but have no interest in doing so, and follow the red plastic blazes upstream.

We walk past a stand of beech trees, their smooth grey bark densely tattooed with graffiti: initials, designs, dates. One reads '1939'. I'm enamoured with the idea of someone cutting this into the tree, standing here 78 years ago, but I remain skeptical. We negotiate a steep downhill, tricky in wet leaves on slick clay soil. We pass by a tiny, marshy puddle, across which someone has lain several two-by-fours. The trail then straightens out, as does the creek, as does the obscured four-lane road, all in parallel. Under the dense layer of fallen leaves, deadfall, and litter, there's a rolling berm of interlocking blocks—roughly cinderblock in shape but with protruding nubs that allow them to fit together.

Even though the canopy has thinned noticeably and early frosts have killed back some of the flimsier shrubs and grasses, it's nice in here, hidden away from the city. It's cool and pleasantly humid; the green walls that separate us from traffic on one side and private property on the other enclose us in a natural cocoon. "It's easy to imagine what it must have been like before Toronto," I say. "Dense, old-growth trees and stable climax undergrowth giving homes to animals. The creek burbling by, nameless, free to flood and meander. No sour exhaust from tailpipes, no plastic bags slathered on shoreline plants, no road salt or fertilizers lurking in the

water table, no too-used trails eating away at soil or fragile roots compressed under too many mass-produced Nikes.

"Except it's nowhere near as simple as that, right? These things I just listed off. They're probably fairly accurate. Things here were roughly stable—metastable—for a long time. There would be floods, droughts, fires, the occasional glaciation obliterating almost everything. The catch is that there's this simple moralizing to a lot of popular discourse around Nature.[12] To boil it down to one line, this view believes Nature is elsewhere, nonhuman, pure, and vital. It is pure and vital, of course, unless it is incompatible with human goals, then what is considered Natural often becomes thought of as base, other, less-than, exploitable.

"Another problem is that if one thinks of Nature as pure and green, then that makes us humans, who perforce exist *outside* of this magical web of nourishing life, as dangerous, toxic, destructive creatures. Which, of course, we sometimes are, but we very much *exist inside of Nature.*

[12] **Henceforth, when using this term as it is used colloquially, I'll capitalize the word in order to emphasize its status as a proper noun—a name we've come up with for something—rather than an objective order of reality.**

Both in the sense of being entirely dependent upon the entities which are lumped into this weird category, and in the sense that nothing—from an operating theatre to a trading room floor to a digital file containing the latest blockbuster movie—exists outside of Nature.

"My concern is that any action fueled by this contradictory dichotomous worldview—no matter how well-intentioned—cannot succeed in the long term. The strange character of this place is another reason why we're here. We're standing on a narrow dirt path, used by people in the hidden, surrounding neighbourhood to walk their dogs, next a waterway which is, by turns, an arcadian idyll or a fetid wash of litter and polluted runoff. A high-speed roadway runs through the valley this stream carved, and the plants and the creek itself thrive in the so-called 'vacant' land around the road. At every turn Black Creek defies this easy split between human and Nature."

It's getting colder. Earlier, when we left the open lawn bordered by busy roads, it was a relief to escape the stubborn remnants of our long summer heat and into the damp clay-smelling cool. The sun is still high overhead in a clear sky, but the rich blue has turned pale. The sun's bright pupil has constricted and it feels much farther away. The leaves continue falling slowly. Never more than a few at a time but it's become a steady falling flow, as though they were anticipating something, fleeing ahead of it.

The trail we're on is straight and narrow, you can see it collapse to a point both ahead of us and behind. "Imagine that the only parts of the creek that exist are the ones that we are aware of: the ones we can touch, smell on the air, and so on. This may be more or less of a stretch for you, depending on who you are. Maybe it's been a very immediate experience of this place, or maybe you've a deep knowledge in botany or chemistry and have been thinking about the commensal interactions between plants or the materials which these plastic bags degrade into as they're eroded by ultraviolet light.

"I know that I experience this place in a rather immediate manner. So much so that it's difficult to hold on to other things that I know to be true about it. Things that are too large, too small, too slow, that happened long ago or are only just beginning—these are hard for me to remember, when I'm distracted by the thick bole of a massive willow or the pungent reek from a particularly rank sewer outfall. But as we walk, try only to attend to the things as they present themselves to you.

"It's impossible, of course, to do this thing that I've asked. We've trained for decades to make sense of the world, to process the things that come in at us and make rapid assessments of them, analyzing them in terms of threat, of value or preference, making associations with past experiences, naming things, referencing categories: dozens of metrics applied to each. Otherwise it would be overwhelming, terrifying, confusing: this uninterpretable wash of sensation that might threaten to overwhelm."

There's a gap in the trees here. A stand of trees, thick, sturdy white, kinked posts, has toppled into the creek. The roots wound around and through the interlocking bricks that line the channel, and they have lifted up a long section of small plants, and a few more trees. This in its turn has exposed a strip of thick brown mud, covered with a scattered pile of un-interlocked bricks and stippled with brilliant leaves in yellow and russet brown. The white-gray trunks hang around the surface of the creek. The water is a faded mid brown, shiny with the faint sunlight, each of the many ripples shining brilliant.

Downstream, smaller trees touch the shining surface of the creek and disappear underneath. There are heaps of darkened, wet-looking leaves there, near where leaves would have been when the trees stood upright. Smooth, hard white lines interrupt the sticks and leaves, standing out starkly: a broken patio chair.

Across the fast-moving, shiny water, this whole scene is repeated. A fallen tree, leaves, rippling water that moves around the pile.

"I might be tempted to guess that one fell first, and the disturbance in the current eroded the opposite bank and may have contributed to the next. I *might*, except I can't see it, I can't hear it. Someone might be able to see it in the evidence here, rather than speculate at it, but *I* sure can't."

We walk the rest of the way up this path, colours bright, noises jarring, scents rich, minds quiet. The trail tapers off under a tangle of vine and low, heavy branches. Here, once again, is the concrete trench, the inverted trapezoidal shape broader and deeper here. We walk down one side, under the bridge of Black Creek Drive. The familiar lines and hard angles of the modern city jar us back into our everyday selves.

"This is an old problem: that we can only know what we know, that we're ultimately limited by information we can take in through our senses. While the scope of things that we are able to sense has expanded greatly—think microscopy, satellite imaging, or global communications technology—this development is called into question by others, concerned that the methods of building this knowledge skew the knowledge so-built.[13] As ever—at least when I'm talking about it—this doesn't mean that humans should abandon these techniques and live once again in perfect harmony with Nature. Not, of course, that such a time ever existed. It does mean that we should be critical of seemingly objective knowledge, consider its methods of creation, and the reasons for people having done so."

"Now, having said all *that*, what if we were to move past the things we think we know and think about things that we don't or even *can't* know?"

"There are a bunch of ways of trying to do this, but I've got a couple here that I've been playing around with, trying see what would happen to my experience of the land around Black Creek if I were to think in accordance with their tenets."

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[13] **Science and Technology Studies haunts me as I attempt to wade through this ideological morass. The monumental works of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway are particularly salient when it comes to picking apart the ways in which seemingly objective knowledge is constructed.**

"First off, let's try on the weird one: the one that revels in paradox and contradiction and takes a wholly absurd approach to the function of reality. It most often goes by Object-Oriented Ontology ('OOO'), but I wouldn't worry too much about the name. The broader strokes of this method are interesting but exceed what we need to search for the source of the creek. Furthermore, I have some reservations about this approach, but I also think it lets us think some interesting things."[14]

Gentle rain begins to fall as we approach the bridge that carries Black Creek Drive. The water in the channel hasn't noticed yet and flows by, unperturbed. "Each of these drops is a simple object, a tiny volume of water, bounded by surface tension, falling through the air. It maybe also contain within it the grain around which the water had originally condensed: dust or salt or anthropogenic aerosols, from car exhaust or industry or a bonfire. The physical object, the raindrop, refers to all of these other objects, it is, equally, all of them. It is also part of the object called 'climate change', albeit a vanishingly tiny part."

"Raised as we are in the rationalist world of modernity, it is difficult to shake the mechanistic, atomist view of the world. Instead we're guided to this non-sensical place, where instead we are asked to think of all these things as individual objects: ones that interact with each other on an aesthetic level, but can never touch the 'core' of each. We have experiences of them but these are superficial and contingent."

The falling leaves, slick with misting rain, now tumble limply, rather than floating on the air. "The potential for leaves to fall from a tree in the autumn rain was already baked into the objects 'tree' and 'leaf' and 'rain' and all their associated objects. The same would go for the leaves being set ablaze, or cut down to create room for an expressway. Our experience of the object changes, but its objecthood remains nonetheless.

"This is when I start to struggle to follow all of the twists and turns of logic required to get entirely on board with this method of thinking about reality. I'm torn between suspecting that the proverbial emperor is, in fact, naked, and acknowledging that I'm a newcomer to all things philosophical. Moving away from the capabilities of human senses is an important maneuver, one which makes possible the validity of things of which we're not immediately aware. Yet it seems to stir up endless questions, hesitations, and uncertainties with regard to how

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[14] There have been excellent critiques of this philosophy, and I agree with many of them. That said, I find that the work done by scholars of the environment who draw from OOO can lead us to interesting places.

one then should act in the world. Even if one believes that the perceived world is constructed and contingent, we still live in that sensuous place, and my experience of that world still impacts me and holds great sway over my actions."

On the verge of Black Creek Drive, we stride through shin-height grass; it's dying-to-dead, rimed with grey exhaust and pulled down by the accumulating rain. It's only a few minutes before we're able to escape the oppressive rushing-by of afternoon commuters and crash through the scrub again, stumbling on wrist-thick branches underfoot: brittle-dry and snapping brightly. I find concrete once again and step down into the channel. I'm surprised when my foot finds grass, fallen leaves, and soft soil.

We navigate off this odd berm and turn to inspect it for a moment. At first blush, it looks like the rest of the shore, but it rests upon the concrete armour of Black Creek. "Imagine how this little pocket of forest was built. First, there may have been some irregularity in the smooth-poured concrete, either a hollowing-out by erosion or a snag, a small snarl from something wedging in a crack or resting too long in an occasionally eddy. Or some stubborn pioneer—often a poplar—will find purchase in a drain, and grow outward, upward, clogging the pipe and providing an anchor around which more mess can accumulate. From there it's only a matter of time and positive feedback: the 'island' gets bigger and bigger, catches more and more trash and sediment, which in turn provides room for more and bigger things to grow and retain ever more soil. Things are washed away but the slow processes of change continue.

"This brings me to the last of the thought experiments I'd like to offer. Like the last such approach, it sees the dominant Western capitalist worldview—built around the rights-bearing, rational individual—as an important contributor to current crises. Rather than positing an entirely inaccessible, unknowable register of existence, this view reasons that all things possess a degree of agency: a suite of capabilities that become apparent in their interaction with other things. These capabilities are obviously highly variable. That rock over there can't make a grocery list any more than I could sit near-motionless in a stream for decades or centuries. And while my capacity for action is much broader than that of that rock, this focus on the capabilities of *all* things places us on an a more equal footing. I'm talking here of Vital Materialism; it deals with the capabilities of things and their constituent substances.[15]

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[15] **Jane Bennett,** *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* **(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), x.**

“That rock can roll down a slope, or fall through the air. It could be split in half or be made into part of a wall or the foundation of a house. But it cannot do these things alone. Any more than I can run or think or write without the assistance of innumerable complex systems: the circulatory system of the tree that made the apple that I ate for breakfast, the logistical supply chains that transported the fruit to somewhere I could purchase it, the function of my body, digesting the food for sustenance. And each of these complex things are again dependent upon countless more.

“So here’s this wedge of sand and plants and birds and bacteria and fungi and garbage and who knows what else. Consider the way that the water deposited sediment and seeds, the way the plants were pollinated by birds and insects, how the roots of the plants cooperate and vie for resources. From here, do you see any significant difference between the emergent processes that assembled and shaped this sandy island and those which assembled and shaped the city? Scale, obviously. Complexity, sure. But if, for example, slime moulds—completely lacking anything like a central nervous system—can efficiently create transportation networks

and solve mazes, then in what ways are we truly separate from the rest of what we so often think of as Nature?[16]

"It's easy to see the cracks in human exceptionalism when you think Vital Materialism with the ways in which we are bound by the limits of our senses. Think of the understanding that a dog must be able to build with its nose, or to pick a famous example, what it must be like for a tick when it catches a whiff of mammalian sweat.[17] **These entities can do things which we cannot. The abilities they do possess are not as polyvalent as ours, but they fulfill the needs of the entity in question.**

"It's this hybrid approach that appeals to me. It is still rooted in the world that we perceive, but requires us to make leaps, to guess, to speculate as to the needs, the function, the experiences of others. Rather than posit a point of unknowability that is fundamentally out of reach, it generates uncertainty from the messy multiplicity of a world I already know, albeit to some meagre extent. Since this method dwells in the material world, it maps easily onto the problems with which I'm interested. Or perhaps I should say *more* easily. *I* believe that the uncertainty which such an imperfect approach engenders enables respectful interaction with others. It's not hard to guess how such an approach might be received in the places in which policies are shaped and laws are written. Especially considering the weight carried by so-called rational, logical, and factual information.

"There have recently been some interesting political developments along these lines. Two major rivers in India and one in New Zealand have been granted human rights.[18] **Many see this as a hopeful, progressive move, but I remain skeptical. For one, if rights can be suddenly granted, they can also be revoked, either explicitly or otherwise. Secondly, these rivers have been granted rights *not* due some inherent 'riveriness', but due to their human cultural significance. Even if these particular changes function as intended, other waterways will continue to be polluted.**[19] **Lastly, I worry about the efficacy of these rights *in general.* The process of deciding**

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[16] **Steven Shaviro,** *Discognition* **(London: Repeater, 2016), 196.**

[17] **Jakob von Uexküll,** *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans* **(Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 44-45.**

[18] **Mihnea Tanasecscu,."Rivers Get Human Rights: They Can Sue to Protect Themselves,"** *Scientific American***, last modified June 19, 2017, accessed July 02, 2017. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/rivers-get-human-rights-they-can-sue-to-protect-themselves/**

[19] **Ashish Kothari, Mari Margil, and Shrishtee Bajpai, "Now Rivers Have the Same Legal Status as People, We Must Uphold their Rights,"** *The Guardian,* **last modified April 21, 2017, accessed July 02, 2017.**

what forms of life count as human—and are thereby deserving of these rights—is a site of horrendous violence.[20] How could this possibly work any differently with rivers?"

We walk away from the little island city, walking against the flow. We walk under another large road bridge: graffiti, grated drains, brief shelter from the elements. North of Lawrence Avenue, I guide us away from the slick concrete and up a grassy rise dense with staghorn sumac. In a few wet minutes we reach the top of the hill: now reading clearly as a long ridge, splitting Black Creek Drive from its namesake. After the crowding of the forest, of the streambed, of those hidden spaces underneath bridges, it feels odd to stand atop a hill, our heads bare to the now-steady rain. There's a row of white pine between us and the traffic below, and apartment towers shining with warm interior lights standing in the ambiguous gray distance.

We follow a narrow line worn into the unkempt grass, as I cast my eyes about, obviously looking for something. "Ah! Here we are." I gesture toward an even fainter path, leading away from the clear ridge and melding into the dark forest between us and the stream. "We turn left at the honey locust." I point to the small tree here, its yellow leaves interspersed with wicked-looking thorny protrusions.

In the dense forest with find the tattered remnants of a few abandoned camps: tents battered flat by weather and gravity are being slowly buried by falling leaves. The forest here feels odd, too many crabapples, mixed with a few conifers. It seems an unlikely mix to my layperson's eye.

We find a route down from the ridge by following something that seems like it may once have been a road. The press of the forest intensifies. The leaves overhead aren't yet saturated with the cold gray rain so it's still dry down here. The maybe-road has fizzled out. We might be following a trail. It might be a game trail, if there are game here. We push through a particularly dense wall of branches and wriggle out into a clearing.

After the claustrophobic time spent under the low canopy, dodging dangling branches and catching facefulls of spiderweb, this feels like a relief, a held breath exhaled. It's not clear why the sky is open here; there's no huge shattered stump, no evidence of earthworks, no remnants of a foundation. Looking up there's a jagged hole, fringed by leaves, roughly the size of

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https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/apr/21/rivers-legal-human-rights-ganges-whanganui

[20] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* **(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 33-38.**

a house. Semi-detached, no garage. The walls of this wet, roofless room are indistinct, its edges rounded by a thick blanket of vines, abstracting the shapes of trees and shrubs underneath. Where the overgrowth has homogenized the place, the gentle entropy of autumn has begun to differentiate it; the chromatic vagaries of different species and different individuals, has crazed the formerly green monotony. The vines themselves slump towards a faded middle yellow-green; heartier trees still hold a stubborn dark green; others exclaim a bright, hot yellow; and much of the low scrub has died back for the year, leaves gone, palisades of brown branches jutting vaguely upward.

The air is rich with exhausted verdichor. Underneath there's a slick sliminess to it all, something that rests greasy on the middle of your tongue, that thin slime between fallen wet leaves; water, bacteria, fungi all doing their invisible work. I can't hear the flow of the creek over the rain, over the soft sounds of you and I shifting through the sodden underbrush. I can't hear it, but it's here. Here in the water that's trickling down our coats, water which may one day flow through the channel. Here in the nowhere-place of this strange clearing. How it holds us, obliterating the reality of the hundreds of square kilometers of surrounding city, the city we're standing in, that is likewise made up of all these plants and water and bacteria and fungi.

"This seems like a suitable place for me to mention another motivation for this little expedition which we're on. Any place could work in theory, but this one works for me." I grin and push my wet hair back from my brow. "So, I grew up in a mining town up north, but moved down to the city when I was thirteen, when my parents split up. I always used say that I was interested in places like this, where 'city' and 'nature' butted up against each other. Grad school maybe have robbed me of the easy use of those words but the interest lingers.

"In places like the lands around Black Creek, I find all these surprising layers: personal biography and memory; the rich wash of sensory information; objects that I encounter here in strange material juxtapositions (all made stranger by hundreds of pages of ecotheory); happenstances of weather and mood.

"Struck by these things and more, I find myself overwhelmed, disoriented, bewildered, *lost*. This is an ephemeral, intentional state, and it has nothing to do with knowing my location on a map. The map remains, but it becomes less significant; it's not the the world I lose, but my *self*.

"In a passage from a favourite book, the author borrows from Walter Benjamin and suggests that "to be lost is to be fully present". Anyone can wander off a trail, but it takes a combination of factors to enable one to choose to become properly lost.[21] I read her to mean that once we've found ourselves in this state we are able to leave behind many of the things which we normally use to hold ourselves apart from the others around us. So disarmed, we are better able to attend to the vibrant world in which we're half-expectedly adrift. Indeed, finding oneself surrounded by the suddenly unfamiliar can generate fear, anxiety, and hesitance, though traces of familiarity remain. Stuck between complacency and horror, one can navigate towards these everyday aliens and attempt to reach an understanding, a sort of mutual recognition, an agreement that you're both here, trying to make the most of this place in this moment."

We leave the clearing. It takes a few false starts, but I get us back to Black Creek. The steady rain has whipped it up, waters raised, tumbling angrily over the rocky bar that splits the channel here. On the far shore, rising up out of the turbid waters stands a staircase built of scrounged stone.

The crossing somehow goes off without a hitch. The rocks are slippery underwater, but our boots are tall and sturdy. Picking our way across the shallows is the hard part. The rocks are

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[21] **Rebecca Solnit,** *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* **(London: Penguin Books, 2005), 6.**

inconveniently softball-sized, and jaggedly split. Their faces all awkwardly askew, begging for an ankle to twist, all the while the eager current pulls at our feet harder than I expect. We both need an occasional hand over the next few, long minutes, but we manage the crossing without incident.

The stairs climb up out of the flooding creek. They're built of a range of materials; cracked flagstones, cement patio slabs, cinderblocks, found stone, asphalt. Their haphazard composition belies their quality; they're well-worn, sturdy, deep, and regularly spaced. At the top of this low staircase there continues a dirt path, hard-packed from foot traffic. From here, the footpath parallels the back edge of a low-rise parking lot, and here again the unusual construction continues. There's a level of improvisation which is uncommon in most building I see in Toronto. It hearkens to the attitude of making-do in developing nations: topping a wall with broken glass set in mortar when barbed wire would be prohibitively expensive or difficult to acquire. Here again scrap cement and patio stones are repurposed to hold up the earth that forms the trail. Different gauges of steel pipe are buried in concrete moorings, tops tied together with fraying ends of audio and network cable. This construction allies with a series of sturdy red pines that frame the parking lot; the builders capped the sharp ends of the horizontal support pipe with plastic bags so that

they wouldn't bite too deeply into the trees. The trees, over the years, have grown outward, around the pipes, but it appears as though the scrap plastic baffling has done its job.

"I wish I knew why this trail had been built, so I could hazard a guess as to why they'd put in all this lovely work. This kludged-together trail fits here perfectly. It has made do with available materials and works in a strange affinity with the land. Its construction was action that feels both deeply human and pleasingly harmonious in this shambling cyborg place.

It's nice to have an easy trail again, and we follow it slowly, regaining some energy. You're looking off to the right, staring at the churning surface of the stream and you suddenly bump into me. I've stopped dead. I look at you over my shoulder and whisper, "Deer!"

Maybe twenty meters down the trail stands a white-tailed deer, stock-still. His tan coat is darkened by the rain, albeit a few degrees less so than the surrounding forest. He's heard our approach, head up and facing us. I expect it was the noise from the rain and the flood-swollen creek that let us get as close as we did. I slowly reach for my phone to take a few photographs.

I feel a reluctance to continue walking; both that I don't want to impose on the deer's business, but also that it's *big*. His eyes and mine would be about level and only one of us has a small set of sharp antlers sprouting regal from our head; only one of us lives here so fully as to vanish into the background, if my eyes saccade wrong. It's clear that we are on their turf. Of course, it's a tiny pocket of theirs in a sprawling steel and concrete sea of ours—to the extent that they can be meaningfully separated, of course. I find myself hesitant, yet I take a step.

And the moment vanishes with graceful pirouette and a brilliant flagging white tail—no two, wait, three more—all retreating into the brush. They move like elemental equations, describing functions I can only begin to understand while I'm looking right at them, improbably silent, or maybe that's just the creek again, masking their escape as it did our approach.

The excitement of finding those deer buoys us for a minute despite the droning rain. We press on, eager to escape the sodden woods before the end of the dwindling day. Following what almost feels like an access road leads us to a small park. We find a paved trail and cross the now-raging creek on a sturdy steel footbridge.

The wide path continues on the northern side of the creek, though the grass with which it's covered is sodden with rain, our feet squishing into the wet soil as we attempt to avoid the growing puddles.

I ask for one last detour and you patiently indulge me. I lead us off the trail a few feet. The creek here is like something else entirely. It's swollen, full to bursting. Behind it, a few

apartment buildings poke through the piecework forest canopy, their lights on against the darkness in which we're standing. These lights spill out past their windows and pick out the ridges that writhe across the face of turbid water. It all averages out eerily smooth, but the shining surface is puckered with the riot of currents underneath, as though writing out the turbulence below in a maddened script. It feels *dangerous*..

"I wouldn't get any closer, personally. This is all the water from up north, fed down here by another concrete channel, leaving the land here to absorb the water that all the hardened surfaces up there can't manage anymore."

We turn to leave, and the water continues flowing by, painted dense with the murky fractals of flowing water: bullied by rocks, roots, branches, shopping carts, vending machines, plastic bags, sand, silt, exhaust particulate, all of it jostling together, building this part of this unlikely creek.

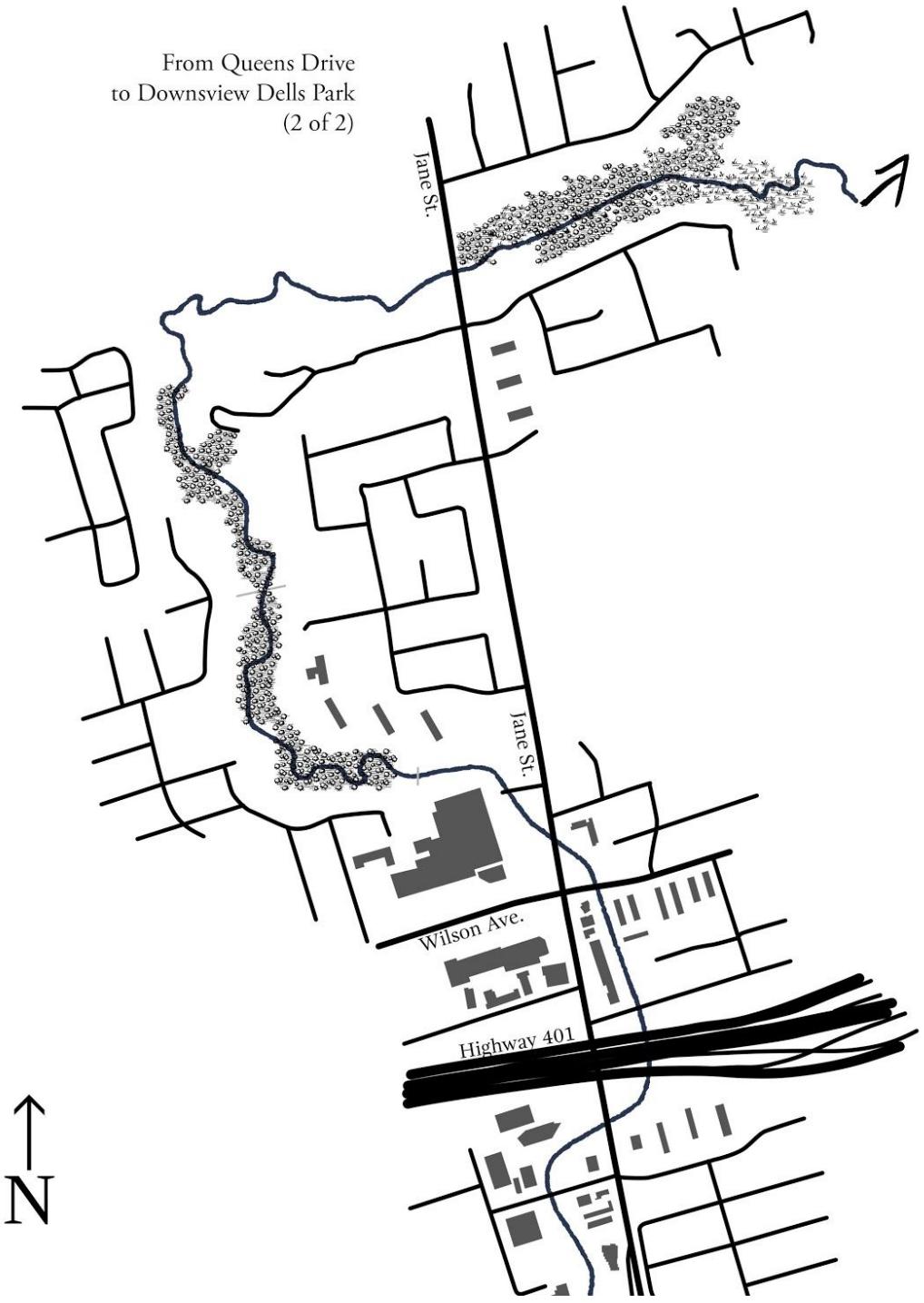
I catch you by the shoulder, my hand slipping a little on your wet raincoat. "Just… before we leave the woods here. I think I've figured something out. All those convoluted ways of thinking about our world that I talked about earlier? I think that one of the most important things that they can do is to make familiar things feel strange; to help us become lost. *Anything* to help to shake us out of our complacency, anything that would make us less secure in our remarkable ability to reshape the world. I'm sure it's no coincidence that many of these philosophies have come about recently, as awareness of climate change—itself an entity which has generated massive uncertainty—becomes ever-increasingly widespread."

It's only a short walk to a residential street. We cross the road. It feels slightly awkward to be back on pavement. I keep overcompensating for uneven footing that's no longer there. In the dour rain, we stand on the bridge over the stream and gaze north. Here again, the creek looks different. It's back in a concrete channel again, filled with seething water, flowing towards us, barely audible but implacable. In the distance, a highway on-ramp cuts across over the surging flood, festooned with sodium-vapour lights, bathing the scene in an otherworldly glow.

"Even if I wasn't exhausted, wet, hungry, and uncomfortably cold, there would be no walking up that thing right now; the only way upstream is walking in the channel and that… that's not an option right now. So. Let's call it a day. We'll find somewhere to get some rest and a dry pair of socks and meet back at the creek when the time is right."

From Queens Drive
to Downsview Dells Park
(1 of 2)

From Queens Drive
to Downsview Dells Park
(2 of 2)



3. From Queens Drive to Downsview Dells Park.

It's cold today.

I'm huddled in the corner of a bus shelter at Jane Street and Queens Drive. The lingering warmth from the crowded northbound bus that got me here has dissipated, painting the shelter's windows with a thin fog. I'm lucky that this is a low-income neighbourhood, far from the wealthy core. The old metal & glass shelters block out the wind much better than do the sleek new ones. Behind me, the brown-gold lawns that frame the apartment blocks are salted with snow. The temperature's been too erratic to keep much on the ground from week to week.

I was a little early, but you're right on time, stepping off the bright bus as it stops, hisses, beeps, and opens its double doors.

We chat briefly. You're better dressed for the weather than I am; I'd been expecting the streak of warm days to continue, having given up on the utility of weather forecasts sometime in July. Cars rush past, leaving sharp, sloppy tearing sounds in their wake. I'm eager to get started, hoping that walking will shake off the chill that had been settling in.

Even getting away from the main road helps a little at first, but the residential towers that flank Queens Drive catch the gusts from sixteen storeys up and drop them square on our heads.

Everything here is desaturated; even the darks seem to lack their usual richness. But it's easy to see farther now, with all of the foliage lying frozen and partially decomposed on the ground or carried off downstream. One can see more—say the full height of the paprika-coloured brick apartment complex over yonder—but the eye sometimes gets disoriented in the muddle of greys and browns of bare concrete, drab bark, frozen mud and decaying leaves.

The footpath that leads down to the channel, however, is easy to spot. We pick our way between dead thistles and grass, fast food containers and flattened coffee cups. Ahead of us there's a shallow pool, dotted with the detritus from the last storm or two; a fractured pleather bag, half a ladder, a red wheeled dolly carting a payload of muck. These will stay here 'til spring, at least.

Back to the shore of the creek, we pause and take the scene in. Despite the cold today, it's been warm enough lately to keep the water liquid. Around the shore, in the shallow parts of

the creek, a thin film of feathery ice grows. Despite the pause between now and the rainy dusk we left behind, we feel the weight of the long kilometers behind us: the scrambles up ledges, slips and near falls, scratches from thorns and welts from bug bites. We returned to Black Creek and our ills were waiting for us.

Away from the ruckus of Jane Street and sheltered from the wind, I sketch out an itinerary for this leg of the trip. "We've got the northern reaches of the concrete channel that gets us through a knot of highways and on-ramps. Upstream from there, we've got more concrete leading us up to a fence that… well, I guess we'll have to figure out when we get there. And. Huh. I don't want to spoil the ending. This part of Black Creek flows right by a lot of places dense with human activity: our businesses, our homes, our infrastructure. But none of this new city-stuff—some of it may be a hundred years old if I'm being generous—seems to want to have anything to do with the creek; they ignore it like pedestrians do a panhandler." I frown and shake my head, unsure. "It's hard to explain. You'll see what I mean."

Our route lies to our left, ever upstream, along the western edge of the channel. It's easy going, our way now free of floodwaters, the flimsy fences of scrubby plants that grow between the paving slabs have been killed back by winter. Water flows placidly along the small central cut, dark under the dour sky.

It's arrow straight and open along the western bank, the sere lawn rolling down a few hills before being stopped short by concrete. The white and gray apartment behind the lawn parallaxes by as we walk, prying open new vistas as others slowly slide shut. A red-tailed hawk glides in from the north and settles awkwardly on the corner balcony of the eleventh floor, looking for all the world like a plastic pigeon deterrent.

The eastern shore is writ in illegible brown-on-brown-on-brown: cold bark/dead leaves/dry mud. A blanket of trash spills across the slope. There's the sprinkling of lightweight paper and plastic to which we've grown accustomed. But this is all heavily supplemented with whole dunes of junk dumped out the back of cars or thrown from balconies. It's mostly white, a parody of all the snow that hasn't fallen. These drifts are spattered with colour; coffee cup maroon, fried chicken orange, hamburger reds, the soothing blues and greens of cleaning products. Much is sun-bleached, but the colours still lurk vivid around the edges. Where the garbage is densest it makes the winter forest easier to read, the browns and greys distinct against the lurid waste.

A few minutes pass and Maple Leaf Drive is behind us. We stroll around a gentle westward bend, passing a few storm sewer outfalls. It's been a dry winter, but even now they're moving thin trickles of salty meltwater away from roads, spilling them heedlessly into the creek.

As we round the bend, the sound of freeway traffic slowly builds, though the cars themselves remain hidden from view, somewhere up on the parallel lanes running perpendicular to the creek. From here it appears dark under the overpass, but as we continue deeper in, it brightens up, acclimation and slowly dilating pupils. We're under it all again: steel, asphalt, rubber, plastic, gasoline, tiny payloads of human being. It feels a bit like the floodwater cathedral under Weston Road—so long ago, now. Everything sounds big underneath the busy highway. Everything, that is, except for Black Creek. It's silent, muffled, only speaking up about having to flow through a shopping cart wedged hard against a bucking concrete slab. Like under Weston, the supporting pillars are dense with tags and murals. This place reads like a hidden gallery, though I'm unsure as to for whom it's intended. The artists, the odd passersby like you and I, and anyone who might be living under the bridge.

An oversized green and gray Coleman dome tent huddles miserably against a bridge support. Though it's well out of reach of the creek, the cold wind buffets it remorselessly, its zippered door flapping open. A worn futon mattress lies stricken across the doorway, and the sketched-in firepit is cold; there's nobody here.

"I've always felt an awkward dissonance in places like these, a paradox that gives the lie to simple notions of public and private. If everything was as it *should* be, according to the copy on the package of modern neoliberal capitalism, nobody would be here, save for the odd maintenance worker. There's no reason for you or I to be touring half-hidden infrastructure: what would we gain from doing so? And if *we're* not supposed to be here, then there definitely shouldn't be anybody *living* down here."

"Yet these narratives of mastery and market power only reach so far. There are always places on the periphery, that exist within—or make up the gaps between—built structures and infrastructure. There are always lives, entities, whole flourishing communities which occupy or emerge from these interstices. While the city has been intensifying—subjecting ever more places

to ever more forms of discipline—there has been a countervailing tendency as well. As more places become subjugated to human aims—usually tied to logics of accumulation—those entities which are not compatible with such aims are increasingly neglected or pushed to the periphery. The entities so neglected may be forced to scrape by with access to very little, but this neglect can in turn become generative, creating out of necessity new relationships, new alliances between entities which find themselves in getting by in the gaps of the modern city.[22,23,24]

"If an entity depends on this place to provide some modicum of comfort and sustenance, I figure that they have more right to it than I do. And be it my own social anxieties or respect for their privacy or both—it's probably both—I'm happy to leave them to their business, to not impose upon anything here any more than my presence already does."

I lead us both away from the deserted campsite. We cross the creek in a precarious scramble across the half-sunken shopping cart. It yields slightly under my weight but stays otherwise steady as I bound from it to the opposite shore. It soon becomes evident why I risked the crossing at all; this side of the channel is clear, but the one we had previously been walking along is lost under a massive lobe of earth. Judging by the density of the dormant plants, these tons of soil sloughed down a few years ago. It would have made the going a good deal more difficult. We make our way along the clearer side, wending into and out of the channel as we must.

Continuing upstream, the creek runs through a no-man's land, under curlicue on-ramps and arterial road bridges. It's tucked in a engineered canyon between freeway support walls and barren scrub woods. "It's a strange pocket of the city, dense with the winding roots of a major north-south expressway. That tangle is pierced through with the sixteen east-west lanes of the Macdonald-Cartier Freeway, known colloquially by its number, the 401. Between the uncomfortable spatial punctuation inherent to highways, the subsequent noise and air pollution, and the underlying threat of flood, it's interesting to see what humans have set up shop here.

"A storage rental warehouse; *La Iglesia de Los Santos de Los Ultimos Dias* **and Disciples Revival Church; a used car dealership, a gas station and a carwash; a Kentucky Fried Chicken and**

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[22] **Anna L. Tsing,** *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* **(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 253-255.**

[23] **Catriona Sandilands, personal conversation with author (29/06/2016)**

[24] **Jennifer Foster, "Hiding in Plain View: Vacancy and Prospect in Paris' Petite Ceinture."** *Cities* **40 (2014): 124-132.**

a McDonald's; the Toronto headquarters of the Certified Restoration Drycleaning Network and Toronto Police Forensic Identification Services. These all have turned their backs to the creek—literally, we're faced with service entrances, dumpsters, grease bins and parking lots—but despite ignoring Black Creek these businesses may well be here because of it.

"Delving too deeply into this would require an entirely different excursion, but others have conducted much work on the subject. There's a significant economic divide between the core and the suburbs.[25] Indeed, many of the lowest property values around here are located right by Black Creek—though I'm definitely not in any place to to claim that this is necessarily *because* of the creek.[26] Despite my fondness for this little stream, I have a difficult time imagining that the presence of this dirty, unstable trickle—especially as it exists here—would drive prices up. Of course, it may work the other way, with the conditions of the stream and the land around it left to languish due to it flowing through several low-income neighbourhoods."[27]

We approach Jane Street, again. This is a simple crossing, the deck of the bridge flat across the channel, maybe ten feet up. Up above us a few people, bundled against the chill, are walking south along the sidewalk. They don't seem to notice us: or if they do they're very cagy about it. I think I'd at least turn my head or bat an eye if I saw some folks down in here. "I've been addressed by passersby before; once some teenage girls exhorted me not to jump in, but by and large nobody seems to notice. It's remarkable the way in which this place is so actively ignored that it becomes invisible. I figure that most folks wouldn't consider this place to be particularly beautiful, seeing it only as some shambolic mess of hastily-repaired mid-century concrete and withered plants. While a few might find it beautiful—or at least interesting—I expect that fewer still would think it useful. It's not a place that many have a reason to visit. The curious thing is how we seem to take on this invisibility when we're in here. I wonder what could be done with it; especially by those who are more durable, more clever, or have more skin—so to speak—in the game than I do."

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[25] **John D. Hulchanski,** *The Three Cities Within Toronto: Income Polarization Among Toronto's Neighbourhoods, 1970-2000* **(Toronto, ON: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, 2007), 5.**
[26] **Statistics Canada, "Toronto CMA: Average Value of Private Dwellings Owned by a Member of the Household in 2011 by 2011 Census Tract," 2013.**
[27] **Donovan Vincent, "The Ugliest Side of Toronto's Ravines,"** *The Toronto Star***, last modified October 15, 2016, accessed March 04, 2017.**
https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2016/10/15/the-ugliest-side-of-torontos-ravines.html

We pass unseen under the bridge and round a gentle leftward bend. A few brown apartment towers stand silently by as we step into a massive, sloping mouth. A mouth because it gapes, it exhales wet breath, carrying smells of cold and salt, as the creek dribbles down its chin. Passing under the 401 is difficult during the summer: when the water is high, the sloped, slimy edges of the tunnel offer only precarious footing. Thankfully, Black Creek is about as low as it gets in these still months of a dry winter, and find our way in along a viscous walkway of silt, gravel, and inchoate ice.

Inside the gloom of the tunnel, there's a four-foot wide grated drain on the wall to our right. Next to that, someone has drawn a rough map on the wall, purportedly of the pipes beyond. Someone else has interrogated the map with a sharpie scrawl demanding to know: "Who went in?!" Peering into the murky tunnel, someone has written "Satan", with an arrow pointing into the blackness beyond. It's silly, but I half-believe it. It's not hard to imagine somewhere buried under the bowels of the 401 lies an infrastructural Cocytus, the frozen lake of hell. Traitors of all stripes are buried in the ice, the depth proportionate to the depth of their crime. I'm not sure what it would mean, to sin against infrastructure. Our trespassing might earn us a little time, down below.

After a few minutes of uneasy footing on crumbling ice, we emerge unscathed from under the expressway. I, for one, don't look back. The slabs of the channel are cracked and buckling here. Thick drifts of flood-borne litter are collected in the creases of the tunnel's mouth. The creek divides the back of a dirty white-brick strip mall from lobed fans of subdivision backyards. We slowly approach Wilson Ave, stalked persistently by the blossoming roar of freeway traffic behind us. For a ways, it's just a play of distant buildings and gray sky flat and distant overhead. There's nobody on the barren lawns around the stream, as though folks in the neighbourhood all adhered to some unwritten law. Across fifty meters of grass and sidewalk, Jane and Wilson bustles by. The intersection is packed with cars and pedestrians, folks walking home from errands and teens waiting for the bus. There's not another soul down here but you and I: nearby but wholly unseen.

The accretions of garbage grow ever denser, finding purchase in whatever sanctuary will have them. The concrete channel ends unceremoniously and gives way to a shaped ravine, bristling with stunted trees and prickly shrubs. These too have sifted litter out of the stream, out of the air, and the place is caked in tattered cardboard, plastic, and wax paper. Rather than crash through the garbage-rich brush, we scramble up the last feet of concrete on hands and feet, emerging on a broad, rolling lawn. Across from us sprawls a large shopping mall surrounded by a coarse asphalt field, made coarser with visible sprays of rock salt. There are few cars parked in this corner of the lot, far from the mall's entrances. While the northern reaches of the lot don't hold a lot of cars, there are clear paths worn through the salt, guiding my gaze back towards the creek. A long thin bridge flexes under the footfalls of a couple people making a crossing.

Three residential towers loom blind overhead, faced with a battered mosaic of windows, drapes, AC units, all in various states of decay. These are The Oaks, or, formerly, Chalkfarm towers. We follow a paved path that loops around the buildings at a distance, cut off from them by a black line of fresh prefab fence. Thousands of people live here, and there's a shopping center—groceries, socializing, household goods, fast food—across the creek, easily accessible via the new-built bridge behind us. Yet there's this fence. Social engineering or spatial determinism or just plain stupidity has split all these homes off from convenient access to daily needs.

And then we stumble upon a gap: a two-metre section of fence is gone. Scrap plywood and fraying cardboard have been laid down over the resultant mud & ruined sod, even though right now the entire mess is frozen solid. Three women, probably in their mid-60s walk through

the gap in heavy coats, the wheels of their folded shopping carts clattering against the uneven peaks of ice-cardboard-earth-plywood.

Having spent so much time thinking about the flow of water, I make what feels like an easy parallel. "It feels like the creek, right? This is a poorly-placed dam, and that which it seeks to constrain will figure out a way to defeat it. Imagine, over weeks and months, the intent of people stymied by this dumb barrier, looking at it, considering it, deciding upon a time and a spot in which to make a breach. Water obviously works differently, and has different desires, but is this a matter of degree, or of kind? I-" I stop, suddenly.

"Jeez, would you listen to me. Likening a marginalized community to water. Waves and tides and inexorable masses of *others* makes me sound like a xenophobic politician. I hope that the fact that I include myself and everyone else in this slow tide, in this sea of humanity, makes a difference.

"I suppose it's a little treacherous, examining the ways in which our agency and capability are ultimately contingent upon the agencies and capabilities of other things. It's treacherous because in doing so we are made to appear less powerful than humans have traditionally thought

themselves to be. This, in turn, is fraught because what it is to be human is no monolithic thing: ideals of equality aside, the actual manifestation of our capabilities to act vary wildly, born as we are into personal, cultural, economic, and political situations not of our own making.[28] I'm comfortable examining the ways in which my actions are limited and dependant upon factors outside of my control: my will—let alone my ability to enact—it is largely built upon things which are not traditionally considered to be 'me'.

"My intent with this analysis is not to further delimit anyone's capability to enact change. In examining the ways in which our agency depends on those—human and otherwise—around us, the goal is to enable action which is more just and more beneficial for more lives. And I *don't* think that whoever made the decision to build this fence has improved things on the whole. It clearly didn't work for the folks who live in those towers."

I guide us back to Black Creek. We veer left down a grassy slope, finding a path just upstream of a nasty snarl of debris, topped with an errant orange life ring like a cherry on a sundae. On the far side of the stream are a row of suburban backyards. They end at the creek with a short, steep drop, grass and earth tattered by the flow of hungry waters. Somewhere in the middle distance come screams and shrieks, drawn out and spun thin by the January wind. School children at recess.

The forest around Black Creek here seems harder-used than other we've walked through. Huge trees uprooted, crack willows cracked. Snags and snarls are everywhere here and the creek always seeks out a path, and so flows widely, aimlessly. "The lives and the lively around it are made to suffer the creek's moods: moods, of course, not entirely of its own making. Needled with pollutants, starved and stuffed in turn, the sprawling city still asks too much of Black Creek. Black Creek as it was, I mean, and this length feels like such a remnant; one that is left and made to make do, without the dubious blessings of bank reinforcement, of maintenance, of channelization, of much anything at all. By the worn-out development through which we've been passing, the monumental apartment towers, the dumpsters and grease traps of the strip mall, and so much litter, I'm primed to see neglect everywhere, and I see it here. It feels unfair, the stream set up to fail, and then blamed for it."

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[28] **Raoul Martinez, *Creating Freedom* (Toronto, ON: Allen Lane, 2016), Kindle edition, chap 1.**

The creek bends again, parting around a small island, still there by the grace of glacial erratics and the lingering roots of a massive long-dead willow. Behind it, a concrete protrusion, sporting the large round rusted grill of a sewer outfall—one that likely serves a stormwater pond I've seen over yonder. Behind that, another new-built footbridge, arcing high above the water. The ground around it is still torn up by recently-gone construction vehicles, and dotted with new trees, their tiny trunks still wrapped in white plastic and burlap. Attention had been paid here, for people to move around, to help replace the woodland, perforce damaged by the construction. The trees selected to be planted here must be selected just so, fast-growing, hardy to pests, happy in wet soil, resistant to salt and capable of making do with only whatever shelter they themselves eventually make.

It's only a little ways until we're up against a chain-link fence, dotted at regular intervals with signs warding off trespassers and notifying us of the presence of guard dogs. It's the southern boundary of Oakdale Golf and Country Club. It's easy enough to circumvent the fence, swinging around the post, through the gap left for Black Creek. "There's no way they actually have *guard dogs* here. Especially in the middle of winter; what would they be protecting?"

"We're stepping from a so-called waste space, a required setback for flood management, from a place almost nobody uses because it's seen as dirty and dangerous to a spot where one must pay upwards of a hundred thousand dollars for the right of access.[29] But it's still the same creek. It's still an extension of countless storm sewers, creaking under the strain of overland flooding, tethered to politics, to heavy equipment, to tonnes of stone and cement and steel. It's still a home and a source of sustenance for lives: some encouraged to live there, many others not. It's still a place that has been made to distinguish along economic, social, and ideological lines in addition to chemical, physical, biological ones: allelochemicals, municipal elections, pesticides, zoning laws, salt, being outcompeted for sun, private property laws, feeding or being fed upon. A place both persistent and constrained, so often represented as a static blue line. But this blue line never ceases moving or changing and bleeds out along countless axes."

As we walk furtively through the open fairways, we don't see another person—and blessedly, no angry dogs. Despite being us alone here, I still feel on edge, as though we shouldn't be here. Which, by one metric, we obviously shouldn't. We're trespassing. However, I can't help

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[29] **Michael Grange and Andrew Willis, "Teeing Up for Snob Appeal," *The Globe and Mail*, last modified March 23, 2009, accessed April 15, 2017. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-investor/investment-ideas/teeing-up-for-snob-appeal/article772172/.**

but wonder why wealth permits the folks who own this course to decide who can be here and who cannot? Again I find us borrowing something from Black Creek: not invisibility this time, but stubborn persistence. The arbitrariness of the systems designed to protect private property—they generate the profits upon which cities are built—is made obvious when considering something that exists across kilometers, across millennia.

We shortcut across looping meanders as we like; the stream has more time than we do. I leave plenty of room around the putting greens—all bundled up in protective tarps—that our paths would otherwise cross: "I might begrudge the course its exclusivity but I'm not here to cause anyone any trouble."

Oddly, it's harder to leave the course than it was to get in. The streambed widens as it wends through the fairways, before yet again sliding under Jane Street in twin semi-circular tunnels. The steep ravine slopes have been graded slightly, and the roadway that crosses it suspended on a tall engineered berm. We'd climb up to the road, but our path is cut off by another chain-link fence, hung with outward-facing signs, and topped with barbed wire. We can either hunker down and walk through the tunnels or risk the main gate, which is likely closed. It's not a great choice, but we go with the tunnels.

It's fortunate for us that Black Creek is at a wintry low, and while it's been mild, it's still cold enough to have thickened the strips of muck that border the shrunken stream. My feet crunch into the semi-frozen mud, but it bears my weight for now. I crouch slightly, motion for you to follow, and with a gloved hand on the frigid tunnel wall, we slowly head in.

It's dark in here, and close. I pause for a moment, somewhere in the middle of the tunnel. Leaning my back against the wall, I can faintly feel the cars passing by overhead. They make only the slightest shiver, referred to me through the asphalt, stone, earth, concrete, synthetic fill of my parka, skin, nerves. The chatter of the creek, muttering about intruders, complaining around rocks, vexed by its slow solidification, is incessant, the sounds piling up, rising as though a flood. I build a small wave in my body—swinging knees, hips, back, shoulders—and use it to push off the wall.

We've passed through a magical portal and popped out in the woods, far away. While we were underground it began snowing softly: big flakes that muffle noise and confuse distance. There are no sidewalks, no sand traps, no houses, no storm drains, no apartment towers. What *is* here is the shifting constancy of the creek, cutting slowly through the earth. The trees here are old and tall, sturdy willows pinning the bends of the stream in place. We're sheltered in the

ravine, but looking around for a little longer shatters the spell; there's the white bulk of the Jane-Exbury towers, there's the sloped roof of a post-war bungalow poking through the bare branches, there's a small gravel parking lot around a decorative garden lying fallow.

The creek bent eastward back at the golf course, we're now walking along the northern shore. Here the water was made to wend around some stubborn geomorphology, some mass that wouldn't let it flow directly down to the Humber, some substance that has long refused the subtle requests of erosion. An open field up on the valley slope gives way to a strange hillside marsh. We push our way through the clattering rushes, our feet once again quarter-sinking into muddy slush. The press of tall woody reeds quickly opens onto what feels like a hallway, paralleling the straight course of the stream. There's a uniformity to the trees here that feels planned, their age, the species, the tight-but-even spacing that ends as suddenly as it started.

The ground is cluttered with sticks. These too are oddly similar, of like length and thickness, like they were carefully curated by dimension, by tree of origin. They *were* curated, of course. Sorted by buoyancy, by tendency to float off to the sides of the ravine when Black Creek

is in flood. There are layers of them, and it makes walking through here a noisy business. More steps than not are punctuated by loud, bright cracks.

Suddenly, up ahead, a weird lattice of whites and blacks looms up across the whole breadth of the ravine. The scale doesn't make sense, composed as it is by uneven chunks that spin normal perspective. Your eye solves the puzzle, but the second-long process is unusually slow. It's a massive heap of dark stones, each crowned with new-fallen snow. It's probably a few storeys tall, but continues to resist easy perception. It's slumped back in what looks like a normal slope, as though these hundreds of tons of rock had, one day, tumbled from the sky and filled the ravine.

"I'm loath to ruin this place with a bit of history, but I feel oddly compelled. After the chaos of Hurricane Hazel, the newly-minted TRCA came up with a plan for decreasing the likelihood that anything like that would happen again. One of the problems with this extensive and costly plan was that if everything worked perfectly then nothing would happen. The newly sculpted streams and sewers, well-placed weirs and dams, would manage the waters from rainfall events and everything could carry on as though nothing had happened.

"This brings us to this giant heap of stones. It's a flood retardation dam. As the name suggests it impedes the flow of the creek, slowing floodwaters down so that the downstream channel has to deal with less water all at once. Large, obvious projects like this one carried the unexpected perk of being large and obvious. Even if everything seemingly stayed the same, there would be these impressive objects that would clearly show where the substantial financial investment had gone.[30] Across the city there are a few large projects that were completed as part of that program of flood control, but this one was the first. It's fifty-seven years old this year.

"None of that helps us get past the darn thing, though." I decide to take my life—or at least the safety of my ankles—into my own hands and clamber up the uneven slope, carefully tracing a zigzag route to the crest of the dam. You choose a more reasonable approach, crashing through some underbrush and then scrambling up the ravine.

We meet again near the northern edge of the rocky dam. Upstream sprawls a massive marsh. This wetland is a glorious mess and we're lucky that it's January; the creek is low, the mud mostly dry or frozen. Reeds and grasses are laid in flat mats, like the haphazardly bristling fur on

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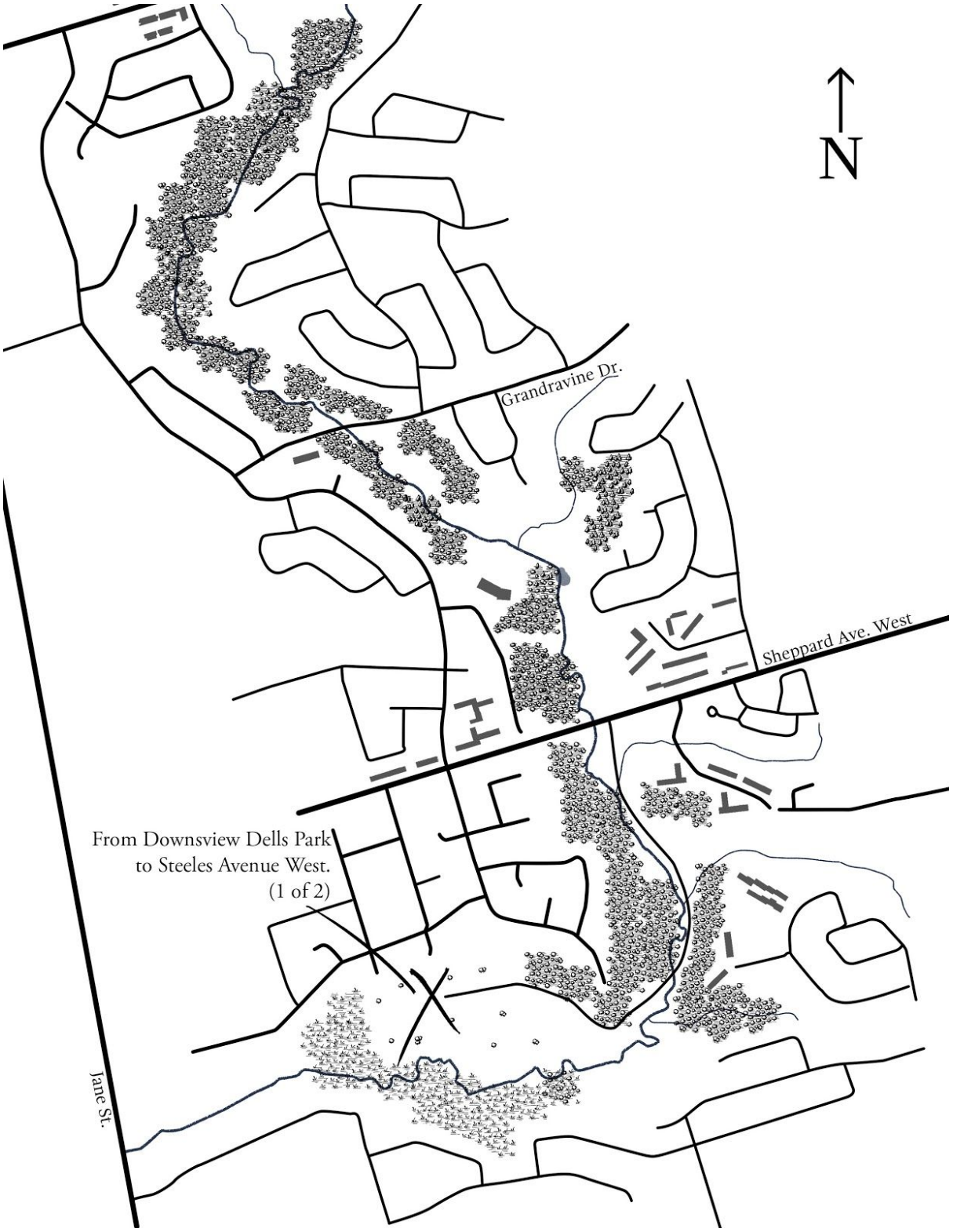
[30] **Chris Bilton, "Storm Warning: Hurricane Hazel and the Evolution of Flood Control in Toronto," in** *HTO: Toronto's Water from Lake Iroquois to Lost Rivers to Low-Flow Toilets***, eds. Wayne Reeves and Christina Palassio (Toronto, ON: Coach House Books, 2008), 86.**

the back of a massive slumbering beast. Walking here on these open, deliberate floodplains is easy, though we often have to double back and suss out crossings a few times The broad swoops and channel branches, the pools and half-hidden, half-frozen mud holes make us pay for the convenience.

After a few close scrapes with the unpredictable marsh, we pass through a particularly dense wall of feathery cattails and stumble into an broad, open lawn. It's spectacularly still in the late-afternoon air, fluffy snow gently falling. Up on the northern edge of the ravine, a row of low houses already have their lights on against the early winter darkness. This reminder of warmth and comfort numbs my cold-stiffened fingers, makes the chilly skin on my face less bearable. This is a convenient place for us to leave the creek behind, and I suggest that we do so. The creek—hidden now even from us—winds off into the distance, gently, stubbornly subsuming the snow, pushing at the ice which is now part of it; was always a potential part. "We're closer, I think. Closer to finding the source, but I don't have the energy to press on into a snowy night. Let's rest, warm up, eat something. The creek will be here later."


N
Grandravine Dr.
Sheppard Ave. West
From Downsview Dells Park
to Steeles Avenue West.
(1 of 2)
Jane St.


From Downsview Dells Park
to Steeles Avenue West.
(2 of 2)
N
Steeles Ave. West
Shoreham Dr.
Jane St.
Finch Ave. West

4. Downsview Dells Park to Steeles Avenue.

It's April 17th. We've met on the grassy edge of a residential street, busy with cars as folks trickle toward major roads, toward their jobs. The thin snows that over the winter are long gone, but the early morning air still has some teeth.

We set off along a trail cut straight along a grassy strip that slips between a pair of two-storey brick houses. Behind the first homes, the left edge of the cracked asphalt trail is a wall of still-bare shrubs and privacy fences. On the right? Forest. Opportunistic ground cover is out, some of the more eager trees are beginning to bud, and the grass that lines the trail is already very green.

We walk down a flight of dilapidated steps and the marshlands piled up behind the rocky dam spread out before us. They haven't fully woken, but there's a lot going on between the little green sprays of new growth and the frantic politicking of red-winged blackbirds. These wetlands extend for almost a kilometer upstream of the dam, and occupy most of the ravine basin. Our side sports an empty parking lot, an access road, and a massive, virulently green lawn. Scattered trees break up the turf, nicely accessorized with a few picnic tables and plentiful plastic waste bins. It seems to be an archetypal public park; open, mown lawn for picnics, for playing catch, for spending a little bit of time outside. I can't help but wonder if in the height of summer, should a pleasant day out go on a little too late, if mosquitos from the marsh wouldn't completely exsanguinate unwary picnickers. The point, however, is academic. It's nowhere near summer and a nearby sign informs me that the park is closed.

It doesn't *seem* closed, with all the tables and recycle bins set about. It doesn't appear to be closed, full of the countless lives we've already seen and all the ones we haven't. It can't be closed, I mean, we're here.

The sign explains, in clinical terms, that due to flooding in in the summer of 2013 and an ice storm that December, the valleys and rivers hereabouts had suffered significant damage. So, there's been heavy construction further up the road, in order to "address the damage and concerns caused by the 2013 storms" and that, "for our safety", the park has been closed "until all at-risk areas are stabilized and restored".

I frown at the sign, brow furrowed. I exhale angrily. "Just keeps going, huh?" I ask, rhetorically. "Black Creek cut this ravine, and planners and developers decided to line it with residential neighbourhoods: first covering the south side in the 1950's, then other developments springing up over the course of the next decade. After Hurricane Hazel, the TRCA acquired the land, built a dam, and set the remainder of it aside for parkland, so that the people who live around here have somewhere to play, to gather, to get outside. Because of this development and untold thousands just like it, the climate begins to shift. It rains more heavily, less frequently. The creek floods and earth and infrastructure is washed away. It floods because that is what it does, that is how it built this ravine that holds this park that can be put to so many different uses, by humans and by others. But rather than to shift with it, to adapt to the changing situation, we redouble efforts to keep things where they belong, which is to say 'where we think they belong'.

"I don't have a solution, of course. There *isn't* one. Now that we've covered the land with 'city', there's no going back. At least not without some catastrophic event, or massive displacement of people and lives, and for what? To be properly 'ecological'? To unpack the word

ecological, what sort of house—*oikos*—would we be building if that was a course which we chose to follow?

"Various organizations have worked with property owners to deploy a range of modest efforts to address the systemic problems which building up a city has imposed upon urban waterways. These projects generally allow more land to absorb more rainfall, to control erosion, and protect ecosystems around and in creeks and rivers. These approaches have done much to improve the circumstances of Toronto's water quality. I mean, at least the Don River—just east of Toronto's downtown—doesn't catch fire anymore.[31]

"Green roofs, rain barrels, permeable paving materials—are effective in ameliorating local watershed problems, and I am all for smart technological interventions, ones that work *with* the personalities of the materials they seek to manage.[32] However, I worry that these 'fixes' may perpetuate the pernicious myth of human mastery over a nonhuman world: treating symptoms while allowing underlying problems to proceed unchecked. It feels both like a bandaid and a drop in the bucket, if you'll forgive the hybrid metaphor. But it wouldn't do to fill the bucket, either; though I suppose that depends upon what we're filling it with. I'm happy to imagine a system that freely allows people to move through the land as conditions dictate; a world where community is more easily built and rebuilt, where people are inculcated with a mindset that makes connection and homebuilding easier, where meaningful relationships with the entities that coexist on the land upon which we live provide material support and thriving. At present, though, this is utopian science fiction.

"The ecosystems in which we exist developed over billions of years of blind shift, genetic happenstance, and occasional catastrophe. While our ability to change things is monumental and constantly increasing, the thing which we must now continue to learn is when not to act outwardly, and to learn when the change which we seek is not located in the world at large but based in ourselves.

"I realize this is easy to parody; I'm not suggesting that the poor should believe themselves wealthy, that anyone should 'lean in', or that we take undue responsibility for the ills

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[31] Roy MacGregor, "Bringing Toronto's Don River Back from the Dead," *The Globe and Mail,* last modified August 15, 2016, accessed March 04, 2017. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/brining-the-torontos-don-river-back-from-the-dead/article31393048/.

[32] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 121.

of the world. I am, however, suggesting that we consider *why* we find ourselves wanting our world to be as we desire it. Though as anyone who has ever attended psychotherapy, tried to lose

weight, or quit smoking knows: understanding and changing one's patterns of thought and belief is *hard*."

We continue along the deserted road. I make a foray onto the grass and find it sodden; it has been a very wet spring so far. The ravine slowly narrows and we see the open waters of Black Creek for the first time today. It's broad and deep here, fifteen feet wide and made three deep in the centre. The water is still and clear, the muddy bed rendered in precise detail.

We walk up the centre of the empty two-lane road. It passes over the creek at a small, low bridge, the underside of which is spattered with fading graffiti tags. Somewhere atop the eastern slope, dancehall music spills out from a car sound system, the doors left open. It's hard to see what's going on above the lip of the ravine, but the still-bare branches allow us glimpses of what might be low-rise apartments.

At a narrow point in the ravine, the road is covered in a few inches of water-sculpted sand, the troughs and runnels running roughly perpendicular to the direction of the road. We've found the work that has closed most of the park for three and a half years.

The sand we're standing on came from the slope opposite. It's covered in coarse new stone, surely intended to allow water to travel down the hill and leave as much hill behind as possible. I'm sure that the creek is the destination for the water, but as it stands there's a road in the way. Rather than spill into a drain or be tucked under the road, the water—as it is wont to do—has found the most direct route to its goal: running across the surface of the road.

Just upstream, a tributary babbles under a bridge and joins the creek. Alongside it, the land bears the unmistakeable marks of heavy machinery; churned earth, bright orange construction fence, shunted-aside piles of dead brush. That trickle wends eastward and gains altitude quickly. If one were to follow it it's not too long before you'd run into Keele Street, and Downsview Park—new, sprawling, and still being built—beyond.

"I wish we had time to take a proper detour over to Downsview Park. It's a strange place. In the last hundred years the land there was home to an airfield, an aircraft manufacturer, and a military base, at least until 1995 when it was decommissioned. After a decade of administrative limbo, work began to design and build a park. It's in an awkward state right now, filled with an odd mix of lingering industrial landscape, residential developments, sculpted earth, and a highly maintained 'forest'. I put scare quotes around it because it's still all so new that the trees still have the price tags on them. I sincerely hope that something like a forest will emerge there eventually; I rather like the notion of humans taking land that used to be a de Havilland hangar and generating conditions to co-create a pocket of forest in the middle of a city. Perhaps this will happen eventually but right now it's just a bunch of trees that require extensive care; more a garden than a forest.[33]

"Let me be clear what I mean here. What I would consider to be a successful forest up there involves human presence, but it also requires us to leave room for unexpected, emergent processes to take hold. To allow the places and lives in this little would-be woodlot to exceed human interest or control. We humans can and should play a role in its growth, but we must use a lighter touch than we so often have. Parts of such a forest may harbour entities which we find to be noxious, unpleasant, or dangerous, but when interacting with those we must be doubly

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[33] **"Urban Forest,"** *Downsview Park,* **accessed July 04, 2017. http://en.downsviewpark.ca/nature/urban-forest.**

mindful of what they *mean*: trying to ascertain their significance for we humans, for other lives, and for the entities themselves.

"Let me bring us back to the ravine here, running back down that little nameless tributary. Downsview Park was designed to manage the stormwater of the parcel of largely open land upon which it sits, to slow it down, to allow the water to be filtered before it makes its way down here.[34] I wonder if all the work here has anything to do with all the goings-on up at that 'dynamic urban park'.

The road continues past the construction site and we follow it. Beyond a locked gate the road is open once more, though it's not particularly busy mid-week, mid-morning.

"The first time I visited this park it was dusk and, over there," I gesture towards an empty grass field, "a group of middle-aged Filipino men were hanging out, having a few beers and playing a haphazard game of pickup volleyball. The road was lined with cars, as they drove in from home to socialize."

"Beyond that, that house on the slope? It's a drug rehab facility run by Seaton House, the city's largest shelter for the underhoused. The shelter—on the eastern side of the downtown core—is currently in the midst of a struggle to stay afloat, as sustaining support and funding for a shelter in a rapidly gentrifying area downtown is tricky, to say the least. While the success of this place is tied to city hall and vociferous NIMBYism in the core, at least it can exist here without better-off residents disturbing it directly."[35]

Past the parking lot at the north end of the mostly-closed park, we climb a short driveway, up a hill to Sheppard Avenue. It's five lanes across across and makes for a harrowing jaywalk despite the ample visibility as the road climbs out of the ravine. The north side is a mirror image of the south: a short jaunt back downhill and we continue to follow a meandering road, walking on the narrow strip of land between it and Black Creek.

Before long we find ourselves in more quiet parkland; the kind you see all over the city, the kind we passed through earlier. Grass, trees, picnic tables, garbage bins, little cast iron

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[34] **"Stormwater Management,"** *Downsview Park,* **accessed July 04, 2017. http://en.downsviewpark.ca/nature/stormwater-management.**

[35] **Emma McIntosh, "Closure of Seaton House Shelter Delayed as City Struggles to Secure Funding,"** *The Toronto Star*, **last modified June 09, 2017, accessed June 22, 2017. https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/06/09/closure-of-seaton-house-shelter-delayed-as-city-struggles-to-secure-funding.html.**

barbecues. "When I was young my mother would drive us down to Toronto to visit my grandmother, and she'd take me out to parks like these. I still have a vivid smell-memory of these places. The resinous pine, redolent in the humid summer air; greasy smoke from family cookouts; the dim wet dirty clay of a brook in a ravine, right next to my grandma's apartment building."

We cross the rolling open lawn toward a line of trees. A bridge arcs gratuitously over the creek to our left, but I reassure you that our route is dead ahead. "...though it *may* involve balancing across a pipe."

We find the short path that breaks through the thin line of trees on this side of the water. It's not Black Creek proper, but another little tributary. The water is high with leftover rainwater, but it's still a good six inches below a sturdy black pipe that runs across it, disappearing into either bank. The trail leads directly to it; the pipe is part of the trail. At maybe a foot in diameter, it would be difficult to balance across, but there are sturdy, low-hanging branches that we can grasp as we take the three steps required to get to the opposite side. The rest of the short path dissolves into another field: more grass, more picnic spots, more parkland.

"I should be honest. My kneejerk reaction to places like this is: 'Great. More lawn.'. I want to get through them quickly, and find the hidden places, the interesting nooks, the exciting discoveries; to add to my understanding of this place... as though I already know everything there is to know about a lawn. It's a short hop from dismissing something that seems banal to missing something interesting.

"I hope that my interest in hidden places isn't some odd species of snobbery. I don't mean to deride the park itself, and definitely don't wish to do so to anyone who uses it and enjoys it. I'm aware that my—of our, for the time being—experience of the creek and the land around it would be considered excessive or superfluous by many. I'm grateful that I've been able to spend so much time getting to know Black Creek. I'm well aware that this is a privilege unavailable to many; they don't have the time, the money, a car, the good fortune of having access to the education that encourages such impractical thinking. Most people don't get a year to try to get to know a hidden place in their city. After all the time I've spent in here, it feels unjust that this beautiful dynamic mess of the place is invisible to most. And I worry that the continued mistreatment of stubborn, ancient, powerful entities like Black Creek is enabled by the delivery of bland green Nature. That comfortable lawns surrounded by mature trees dilutes places like this down to their simplest, most easily digestible components. If that's the Nature to

which most folks are exposed, mightn't they think 'If it doesn't look pretty, if it isn't comfortable, if I can't enjoy it, then what is it even *for*?'"

Across the lawn, past a few built-in barbecues, we approach the base of a long, tall climb. While you choose to take the path up over the built ridge that supports Grandravine Drive, I stubbornly decide to head through the culvert, sticking close to the creek. Your decision makes more sense, but I insist on doing a little impromptu infrastructure-spelunking. "I've done it before; it was fine," I insist. "It's a little hairy, but I'll see you on the far side."

Your climb is a bit of grind, despite the trail making use of the breadth of the ravine to make the ascent more gentle. The short bare trees that line the asphalt are dense enough to block out the creek, most of the time. Through a break in the understory you catch a glimpse of me struggling out of the creek, up onto the western shore, but then I pass behind the disintegrating trunk of a long-dead willow and you lose me again. A few minutes later the path meets a sidewalk. From up here, you can look out over the ravine, but most of the vista is obscured by a lattice of bare branches. There's no traffic on the road and you cross easily. The cracked path

you just hiked up has a partner on the north side of the road, dipping back down into the valley. I'm somewhere underneath all this right now, maybe fifteen metres straight down and a little off to the left. Fifteen metres of earth, stone, grass, road, a thin layer of corrugated steel and a cushion of air.

You stroll easily down the path and are startled by a man on an e-bike whipping past you from behind. It's bright under the leafless branches, and the undergrowth is taking full advantage of that. The dank mud smell of the creek is buffered by that smell of *green*, so welcome after five cold months of browns and grey. There's a hint of that old decay left underneath, too. You find a bench a little ways off the path, overlooking the creek. You take a seat and wait for me.

I appreciate your patience, and I tell you as much when I return, a minute or two later. My trousers are drenched from cuff to thigh, and I'm walking softly-squishing steps with a slight limp.

I look a little bashful as I relate what happened to me while I was underground. "Okay, so, maybe the water was lower when I last tried it. Maybe the steel culvert was a little less slick." I untie a boot and pour it out, then pause to wring my sock halfway back to dry. "It is *something else* under there. That could have gone better but I'm happy with my bad decision. There's this horrible sense of closeness in there, not that it makes much sense; the culvert is probably ten feet across and you can always see out either end. But there's a spot in the middle where it's caved in in slightly, crushed like an old beer can, and it doesn't take much imagination to picture countless tonnes of earth and gravel pouring through on top of me. No reason it should happen right now, I kept telling myself."

"And it didn't. But I did fall into the bloody creek. Tore my pants on a rivet the way down, but it didn't break skin. I'll be fine; just gonna have to walk it off."

The day has unfolded into a lovely one, those kind one finds in spring where the sun wields a hint of its summer heft but there's a light breeze, and the shadows still work as intended. "We were in Northwood Park. Now? Derrydowns Park. It's mostly this asphalt trail, some bridges, and access points: stairs and paths and so forth. Towards the north end it's a bit more built up, but there's not much in the way of facilities. The lack of facilities, combined with the surplus of undeveloped land creates the opportunity for people to make more interesting uses of it. That's what I find some interesting about this length of Black Creek. It's still the same creek as the invisible further south, but here, by merit of the ravine land around it, there's room to accommodate lives and activities that are only possible here, that exist in fractious alliances with

the water, with the woods, with the intended uses of city parkland. More than that; these emergent human uses are *part* of Black Creek as it is, just as much as is the water, rocks, or this stand of flowering Manitoba maple."

"The neighbourhoods around here are often collectively referred to as Jane and Finch. I went to high school in downtown and back then this neighbourhood was a punchline, a shorthand for a dangerous, violent place, maybe like one of those American inner city ghettos you see in movies. I'd never been up here, of course." I feign horror. "Why would I want to?!"

We cross a bridge as Black Creek winds across the flat bottom of the ravine. Towards us walk two young men, both in windbreakers, one red, one blue. They're walking a nondescript brown dog on a short leash. To the east stands a steep sandy bluff, where the water's flow cuts into the constraining slope, and carries it off, somewhere downstream. Tall, stout trees stand at the lip of the bluff, dangling precariously, their roots in air. Others, fallen already, collect at the base, lying in the water, collecting leaves and litter and soil from other bluffs further upstream.

"I'd like to think I've improved somewhat on my ignorance, on my adolescent callousness; though while I acknowledge my part in their creation—from inexperience combined with ingrained and then-unquestioned classism and racism—I didn't make these notions out of whole cloth. There exist powerful narratives of fear, hatred, and exclusion that create neighbourhoods such as these. Attempting to engage with, or to begin to untangle these troublesome beliefs would lead us too far from the creek, but we still encounter aftershocks here, the consequences of oppression that bleed into this place.

"Getting in the car and driving out of town to go for a hike. Having the neighbours over in your backyard. Playing cards in the basement with some friends from university. Going to your local pub for a pint after work. Taking the kids to the museum on the weekend. What sounds like normal to me may sound like absolute luxury to you. What precisely constitutes a necessity has been open to debate, and such things have been subject to slow erosion for decades as socioeconomic inequality worsens.

"Folks who have formal access to very little can still use the places around the creek. There are limits to the services that a thin strip of creek-split woodland can be made to provide, but the ones that are possible are significant, and significantly better than none at all."[36]

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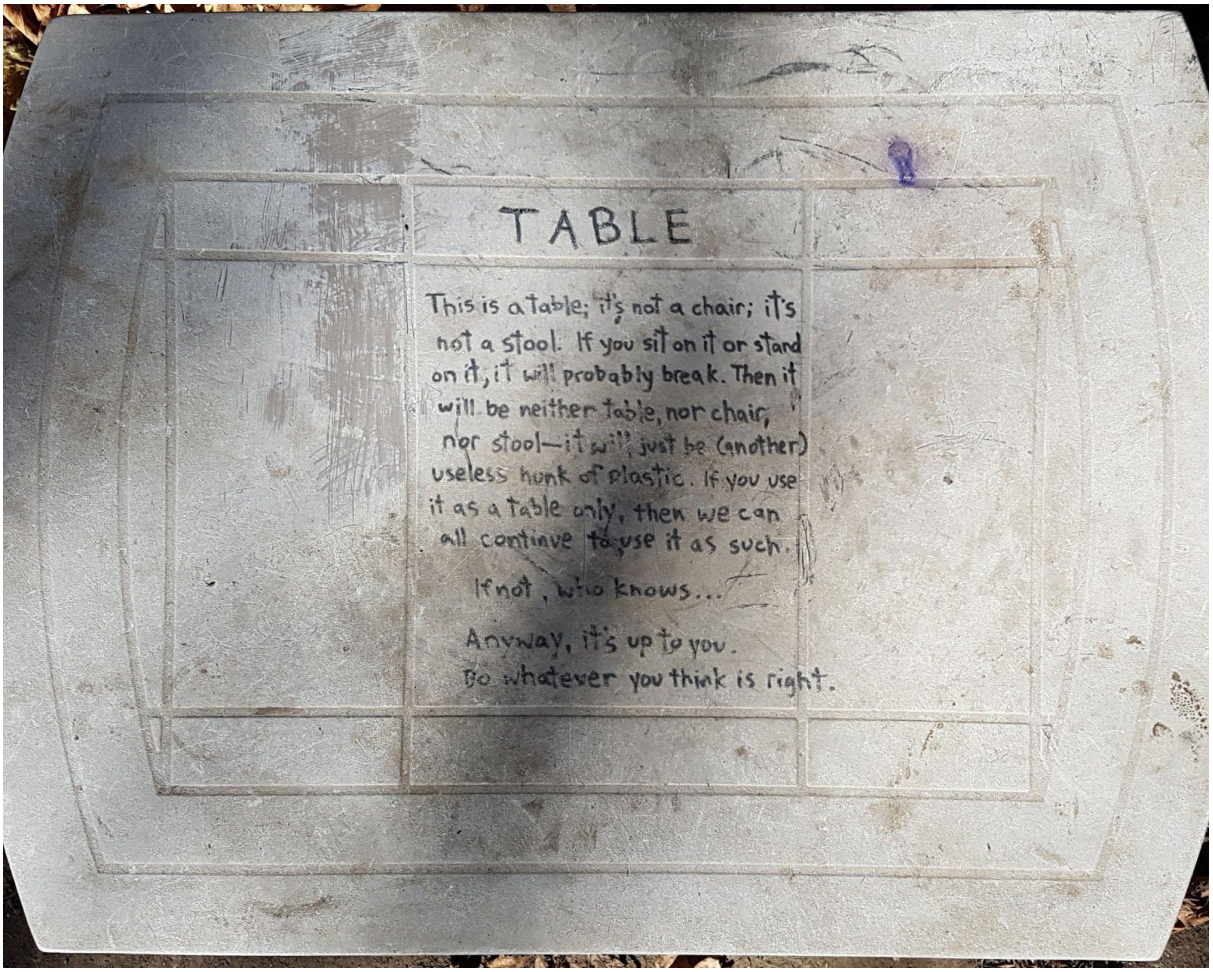
[36] Peter Timmerman, personal conversation with author (11/07/2016)

The buds have swollen, some are ready to pop and unpack their limp foliage. Most of the understory is in a hurry to make the most of their pilfered daylight, before the canopy fills in. The land and the marks upon it lie legible through this sparse cover. As we found further downstream—as is the case with most of the liminal places throughout the city—we see the odd improvised camp. A tent or improvised shelter, plenty of litter, the wreckage of cobbled-together furniture & appliances: cooking grills, laundry lines, everything scattered as though shaken out by a giant, then slowly buried under leaves, dissolving in the rain.

I lead us down a well-worn side path. After a minute, tucked away on the lobe of land between asphalt trail and creek, there's a spot for socializing. A bonfire, still slightly smoking from the night before. Notes affixed to surfaces, asking people who use this spot to clean up after themselves, to respect each other and the place, to bring in firewood to replace what they use. The spot is mostly tidy, though there's a small collection of distended plastic bags, lumpy with litter. There's an odd empty can tossed here or there, but it *looks* like folks abide by the informal bylaws.



On the way back to the main trail, we happen across a few large tupperware tubs. They've been modified somewhat, rough holes cut in them at ground-level and filled with a thick layer of straw. They're shelters for feral cats. Formerly domestic cats from the surrounding neighbourhoods have established a community here too. I've seen more than a dozen cats while walking the land around Black Creek. You'll remember the big black cat that leapt the width of the creek down by Jane and Rockcliffe. I met a long-haired calico that seemed cautiously interested in me before eventually making up her mind and ineffectively hiding under a small shrub. Last summer I watched a mackerel tabby unsuccessfully stalk a bird a little ways upstream from here.

A ragged drainage ditch cuts across the path we're walking and passes underneath through twin small culverts. There's no signage, no guard rail, and while there *is* a life preserver, it's lying snagged on a rock in the middle of the trickling stream, right where it melds with the flow of Black Creek.

"This quirk of geography—the ravine—and the threat of flooding has created a gap in the gridwork of the modern city of Toronto. This thin crack provides a place for lives, for modes of living, that are marginalized by dominant practice. The marginalized lives are varied, but they've gathered here. It's humans—I'm guessing predominantly men—who want a place to relax and socialize or those who lack the resources to acquire formal housing. It's cats who've been abandoned or born into litters that couldn't be cared for. It's plants and insects who've been brought here from other places by human activities and whose success in such gaps makes them a threat, earns them the epithet of 'invasive'.

"These invasive lives are things out-of-place; they shouldn't be here. I do not say this to attempt to discount the damage, the loss of vitality, the collapse of complex relationships that has been the result of the introduction of unexpected species; asian carp, dutch elm disease, emerald ash borers, dog-strangling vine, garlic mustard, phragmites, the ongoing struggle with the 'effectiveness' of Norway Maples throughout Toronto's urban forests.[37]

"This drive, this belief that things could, or maybe, *should* be another way is something that we humans do. We want things to be different and try to solve problems until things are

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[37] **Catriona Sandilands, "Dog stranglers in the park?: National and vegetal politics in Ontario's Rouge Valley," *Journal of Canadian Studies,* 47, no. 3 (2013): 100.**

closer to the way we desire. If one entirely believes stories of progress, of technological advancement, of improvements gained by the spread of Western liberalism, then that's all there is to it. We have solved some of these problems, for a few or for many. Literacy, smallpox, access to Facebook, plentiful hamburgers. Sure, these solutions have created some 'externalities', some unexpected consequences, but if we just solve *those* problems then everything will be fine.

"The ways in which we solve problems often creates more, and we are running out of space in which to displace these externalities. This paradox has been made clear by the increasingly widespread dysfunction of the systems upon which our continued survival depends.

"Which brings us to another problem. One which I'd call *The* problem: the acceleration of changes in global climate, ocean acidification, and mass extinctions which is often collectively referred to as the anthropocene. It may strike you as odd, me suddenly holding forth about floods and famines and rising seas when you and I are standing here."

Here being, walking along a lightly shaded path on a perfectly pleasant spring day, surrounded by blossoming spring wildflowers, budding trees, birdsong, nicely warm sun. We're slowly rounding a bend that follows a valley, that follows a small creek, somewhere in the inner suburbs of Toronto. "That's one of the things that makes tackling these enormous problems so tricky. We're standing in climate change right now. We're soaking in it, the carbon dioxide which is warming the planet, we're benefitting from the systems of growth and capital accumulation which have exacerbated—if not created—this problem. We *are* it, it is us.[38]

"I'm not advocating that we return to some pre-modern state, some time—that never existed—where we lived in perfect harmony with a nourishing Nature. The way to a solution will inevitably involve the use of technologies, of ideologies, which are deeply enmeshed in creating the problem they seek to solve.[39] As ever, I'm concerned about the illusion of mastery wrought by our substantial ability to change the world around us. Every action we undertake has repercussions. Of late, these repercussions are extensively estimated and projected, in the short and long term, for humans and for the ecosystems from which we are *still* so often considered separate. So often, however, the consequences of our actions create problems which spread out a great ways, sometimes even outliving the impetus for the original action. From Black Creek to

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[38] **Timothy Morton,** *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, **(Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 28.**

[39] **Timothy Morton,** *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence,* **(New York: Columbia Universities Press. 2016), 46-55.**

the LA River to the Three Gorges Dam, once we do a thing, undoing it requires immense amounts of technological, economic, physical, and political power, should it even be possible.

"So, it must be careful, measured use of the abilities that we have. It must come from a place which acknowledges our interdependence—the other humans, other lives, other arrangements of nonliving matter which support our individual and civilizational existence. This action must allow for change, for us to adapt quickly to the changes we have wrought. We must hold loosely to the things which we truly need. But we must still cling to these precious things, and attempt to perpetuate the things which are the best for the most lives as we brace ourselves to weather the repercussions of centuries of frantic, ravenous capitalist modernity."

We walk past stands of red-osier dogwood, still standing out starkly against the tentative green growth. Beyond here stand new stairs in latticed steel, built up the ravine slopes for safe access. A group of children, most of them probably ten or eleven years old, runs past us in matching gym uniforms. A few moments later, another group of kids, having lost sight of the first, asks us for directions. Time passes unnoticed; we continue up the asphalt trail. Down below in another small tributary, a still pool is filled with a riot of minnows and tadpoles; the smooth surface convulses as they flee from our shadows. The forest shifts around us, becomes suddenly darker as a small stand of tall pines sway overhead. Beyond a parking lot and up another steep slope; we cross Finch Avenue with a brief sprint. It's tough to find a gap in 70km/h traffic.

"Traffic here was interrupted for a while in 2005. The creek, down below, lying placid in its channel, swelled with rain following a summer storm and washed the road away. It has long since been rebuilt, with a higher-capacity tunnel, designed to protect the road and the water main, the gas lines, and the sanitary sewer which run beneath it. It was updated from the original construction with a new understanding of the increasingly likelihood of large storms. Even large well-resourced organizations seem to find it difficult to do more in the face of climate change than battening down the hatches, enabling the perpetuation of business as usual.

"And that difficulty springs from many sources. Not the least of which is complexity, of understanding causes both proximate and not. Earlier I advocated for a worldview which seeks out impossible complexity, one which hopes to find new alternatives for action in this overwhelming cloud of agencies. But I don't know how one translates those notions, concepts, or feelings into effective action. Take this example: I just suggested that Black Creek was somehow to blame for the washout at Finch, twelve years ago. If we are to prevent such

incidents in the future, what should be done? If the problem is caused by debris in the creek, then perhaps clearing the channel and surroundings of deadfalls and litter might help. If the problem, however, is caused in part by the decision at York University to design its storm sewers to deposit water solely into the Humber River watershed, rather than splitting it between the Humber and the Don, then another solution is required.[40]

"And if the problem is larger still, what then? The nature of the imposing, diffuse networks with which we must contend, the scope and power of increasingly erratic weather, driven by deranged climate, makes evident our enmeshment in systems much larger than us. Seeing how deeply we're tied to other entities—large and small, near and far—gives the lie to old, simplistic views of the world. The lines drawn, divvying the land into lots, wards, districts, watersheds are shown to be what they are: concepts, drawings, ideas, wishes. These numinous things of which cities and nations are built are sometimes quite powerful, but can also be ignored, transgressed, or washed away by entities that don't believe in them."

We walk through more shaded ravine. A young man in a suit sits on a bench and smokes a cigarette. His attache case sits on the bench next to him. From upstream, comes the loud, blatting roar of an unmuffled engine. I imagine a teenager on a jury-rigged moped, tearing along the paved path, though if he? exists, he's not heading our way. The racket slowly fades as we emerge from the forested valley.

"There are a number of confluences with Black Creek here, though with any luck, none of them will mix with the waters that flow downstream. First, there's a bike path, recently installed underneath the towers which bear the second flow, electricity. Lastly, and interestingly, here's the place where a fossil fuel pipeline crosses the creek. There's a certain foreboding here, the potential for the line to fail, to spill out untold volumes of diluted bitumen into the waterway."

"The curious thing about this is how it distorts space. Suddenly this small creek is subject to 700 kilometers of petroleum pipeline. To the devastation of the Northern Alberta tar sands. To international demand for oil and the vagaries of commodities markets. This is not unique to this particular place, but this is an intersection where it becomes particularly apparent."

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[40] **L. Anders Sandberg, "Stong Pond: What Roles Does it Play in Managing the Storm Water on Campus?,"** *Alternative Campus Tour* **(blog), accessed July 06, 2017. http://alternativecampustour.info.yorku.ca/sites/stong-pond/**

Upstream from these eerie confluences the woodlands explode around us again, now that trees needn't be cut back and kept clear to allow for the safe transmission of electricity. Here again we're concerned with water—in the streambed and in sewer pipes that crisscross the ravine, underground—and the flow of people.

"Though the comings and goings of folks have always been something to which I've paid attention while I've been following the creek, here it takes on a particular tone. Rivers have often been used as places to draw borders, between lots or between nations. It seems only normal, "we'll stay on our side and you stay over on yours". Here in particular, Black Creek seems to function as a border, one between York University—which I am currently attending—and one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Toronto."

"It's curious, because it isn't an explicit border. There's no signage, no fences, no warnings of guard dogs like the golf club further downstream. But on the other hand, there's no surplus of paths, or stairs or wayfinding signage.[41] I'm in no position to say whether this is intentional or a side-effect of York being a commuter school, but to attempt to walk from Jane St. on the west to the university grounds, any way other than along the Shoreham Drive bridge, a little ways north, is a difficult undertaking."

"Black Creek, this blurred boundary, is made all the more interesting by the parties on both sides who are drawn to the creek, as I have been. The marks left on the land are curious and difficult understand definitively."

We do not stray from the main path; asphalt, dotted with the odd bench or garbage can. "It's remarkable what it's like here in the summer; the foliage on either side of the trail is so dense that you could easily miss everything that you're walking right past." As it is, we can make out the faint dirt paths that traverse the ravine, many of them leading to easy fords across the stream. On our left, a wall of mid-sized apartment towers lines the ravine. We can often see the stream as it meanders here, first within a few feet of the path then disappearing off into the bush, only to return a minute or two later.

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[41] Unterman McPhail Associates, "Heritage Impact Assessment Report: Hoover House," last modified February 2014, accessed June 22, 2017, 45-51. https://www1.toronto.ca/City%20Of%20Toronto/City%20Planning/Community%20Planning/Files/pdf/Y/York_SWPrecinct_HIA.pdf. According to this impact assessment report, a plan is in the offering that might provide pedestrians with easier transit from York campus and the Black Creek community than is currently possible.

"Just east of here, if you crash in along one of these footpaths, there's a wide bend in the channel with a rope hanging down over the water, somewhere to run and swing across the creek. Just south of that runs a rough stone weir, something that allows one to cross without boots. This leads to an extensive network of trails, leading to benches up on the eastern bluffs, a small shelter with chairs and a BBQ. The trails even have weathered, flimsy bridges over tributaries to Black Creek, those that carry floodwaters down from the university grounds. They weave around the grounds of the Hoover House, a presently-abandoned farmhouse that dates back to the 1880's[42]. Not far from there lies a community garden, run by students from my faculty, when they can find the time and resources.

"From the western side, different requests are made upon the lands of the creek, muddying the boundary of the ravine. Few of the folks who live in this neighbourhood have much to do with the university, so many of those traces are behind us, downstream. Trails to commute or visit friends on the other side of the valley. Also, as we found further south, spots for bonfires, or the odd campsite for those who live in the ravine. A few years back there was a curious incident, wherein someone from the neighbourhood made use of the creek parkland a *little* too close to university facilities.

"News broke one day about a potential terrorist plot to disrupt the upcoming Pan-Am games. A tunnel had been discovered near the tennis stadium on western edge of York campus, and somehow the conclusion was reached that it was a threat. It turned out that the tunnel—well underground, ten metres long and two high—had been someone's hobby. Elton McDonald, a young man who'd grown up around Black Creek had dug the thing, and done so expertly, combining knowledge gained working construction with a childhood spent playing in the ravine. [43] It's no wonder that he and his friends had ended up playing there. The makeup of the neighbourhood has half as many single-detached houses and 50% high-rise apartments as the city average. This, along with a full quarter of dwellings failing to meet the national occupancy standard—suggests a dire need for outdoor space, and as private yards aren't often an option, this falls to places such as the Black Creek ravine."[44]

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[42] Ibid., 7-12.

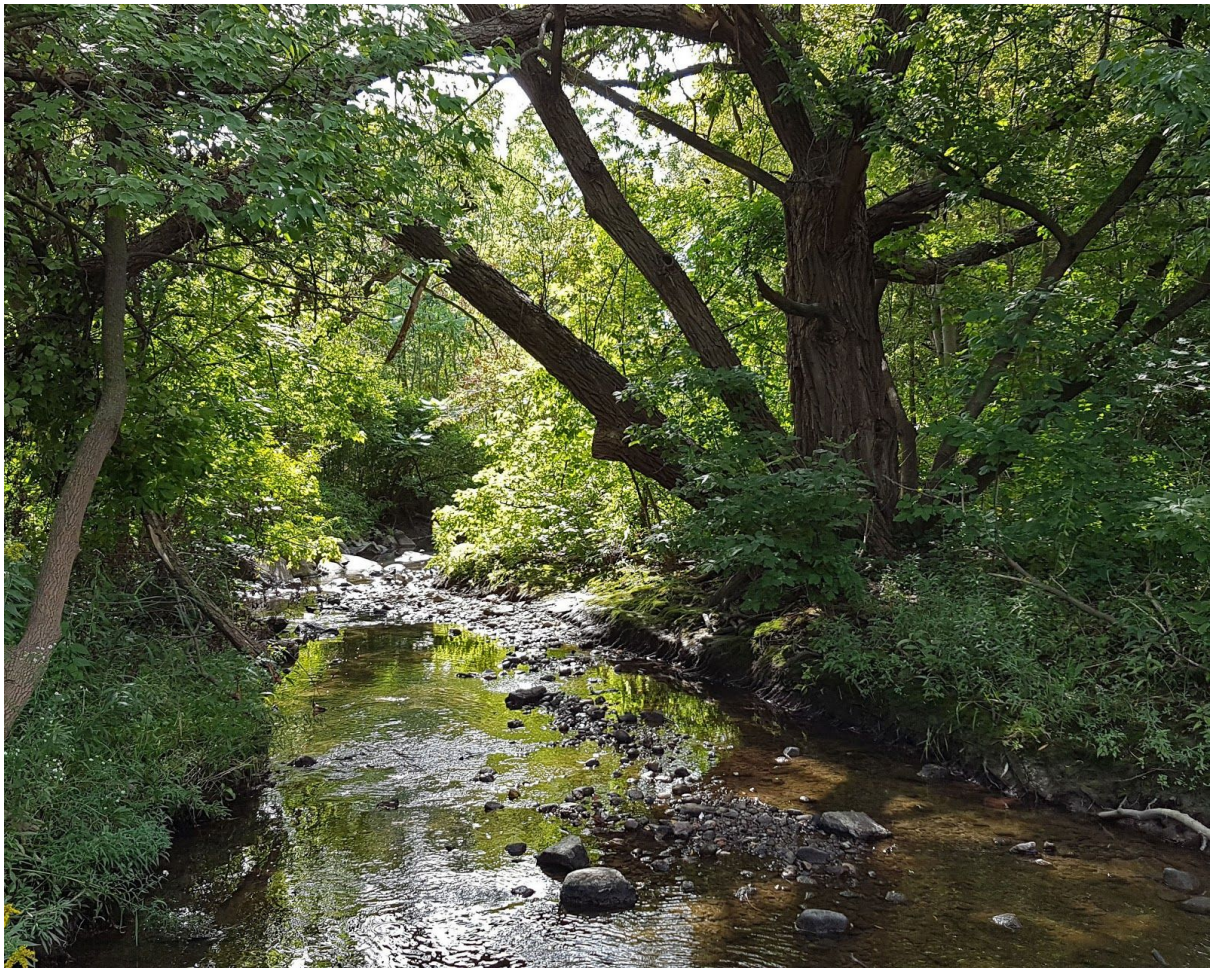
[43] Nicholas Köhler,"The Incredible True Story Behind the Toronto Mystery Tunnel," *Macleans*, last modified March 20, 2015, accessed February 20, 2017. http://www.macleans.ca/society/elton-mcdonald-and-the-incredible-true-story-behind-the-toronto-mystery-tunnel/.

[44] Social Policy, Analysis and Research, "Neighbourhood Census/NHS Profile: Black Creek," (Toronto, ON: City of Toronto, 2014.)

North of Shoreham Drive the tone of the ravine shifts again, suddenly. To the west, the top of the ravine is walled off by the back fences of row houses. On the east side, there's a maintenance road and a large gravel parking lot, both of which serve Black Creek Pioneer Village.

"Usually when I mention Black Creek to anyone, they assume I'm talking about the Pioneer Village. It's a heritage site: you know, costumed reenactors, a schoolhouse, a chapel, a weaver's shop, farm animals. It's all situated on the site of a 19th-century farm, though very few of the structures are original to the site.. Not even the stout stone mill has anything to do with Black Creek. There's a millpond and a raceway but they're there to give the appearance of pioneer life, not to actually live. The only thing which the Village asks of the creek from which it takes its name is to carry off excess stormwater.

"That's my main complaint with the place. Not only do you call your heritage village 'Black Creek', but then you have nothing to do with the creek. Imagine my disappointment when I first visited. But despite the lack of any official programming, the Village's presence has



inadvertently shaped the land here. We're about to have to deal with the downside of that; the trackless woods up ahead are nigh on impenetrable. Before we struggle to break through that—I know I'm tired already—let's take a break." We find the bole of a recently-fallen willow and turn it into a bench for a while.

While we rest, I tell a story—

It was much hotter than today: lingering summer spilling over into early autumn. I walk down into the ravine, looking for a little stream that I thought was in there, somewhere. I was surprised by the speed at which parking lot became access road became trail. I scan the thin grassy verge for a discontinuity, somewhere I might trade this paved path in for a smaller one.

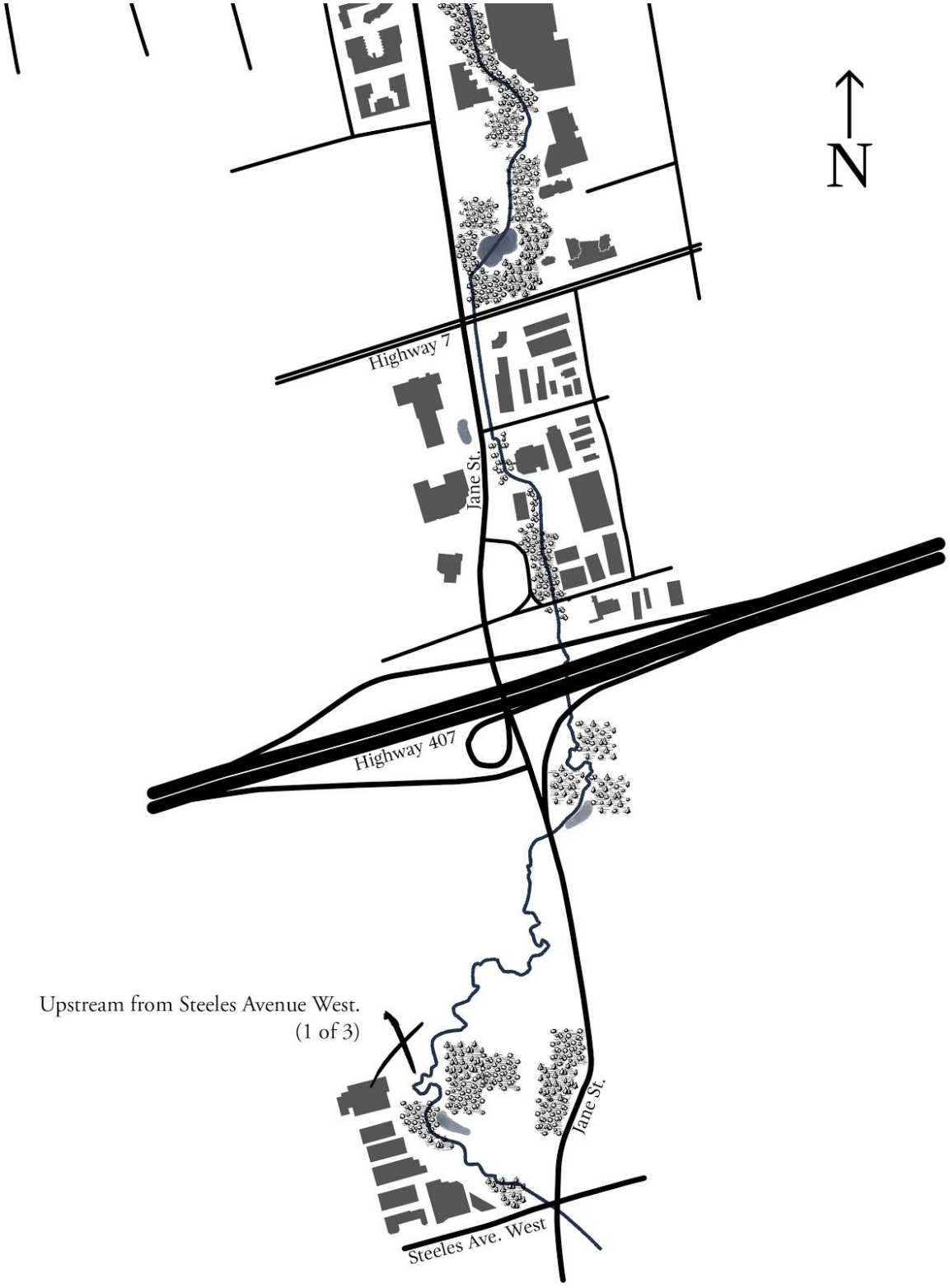
I find one such and shoulder my way into press of foliage. It's tough going, and after a few metres I pause in the shade of a tall tree, sweating steadily. I suddenly notice an odd sound, uncountable layers of tutting and clicking. Then I see the first grackle: plumage darkly iridescent with a piercing yellow eye. It hops from branch to branch, regarding me with mechanical avian disdain. It takes flight, overhead, back the way I'd come. This happens again. And again. Then a hundred times. Maybe a thousand. I've disturbed a whole flock; I don't know why they're here but they're all passing overhead, around me, in flits and starts, each speaking their piece, though I cannot understand.

It's later that I guess that they were there because of hawthorn berries. While there were birds and berries, there were other lingering presences too. There too were the boulevards and lawns of the city; the birds were there because this is where trees still bore fruit. The stories told by european architects in the early 20th century were here too. They had suggested the towers that unrolled lawns that moved the birds here, here so I could startle them and be buffeted by their shimmering wingbeats, shaken by their aureate gaze.

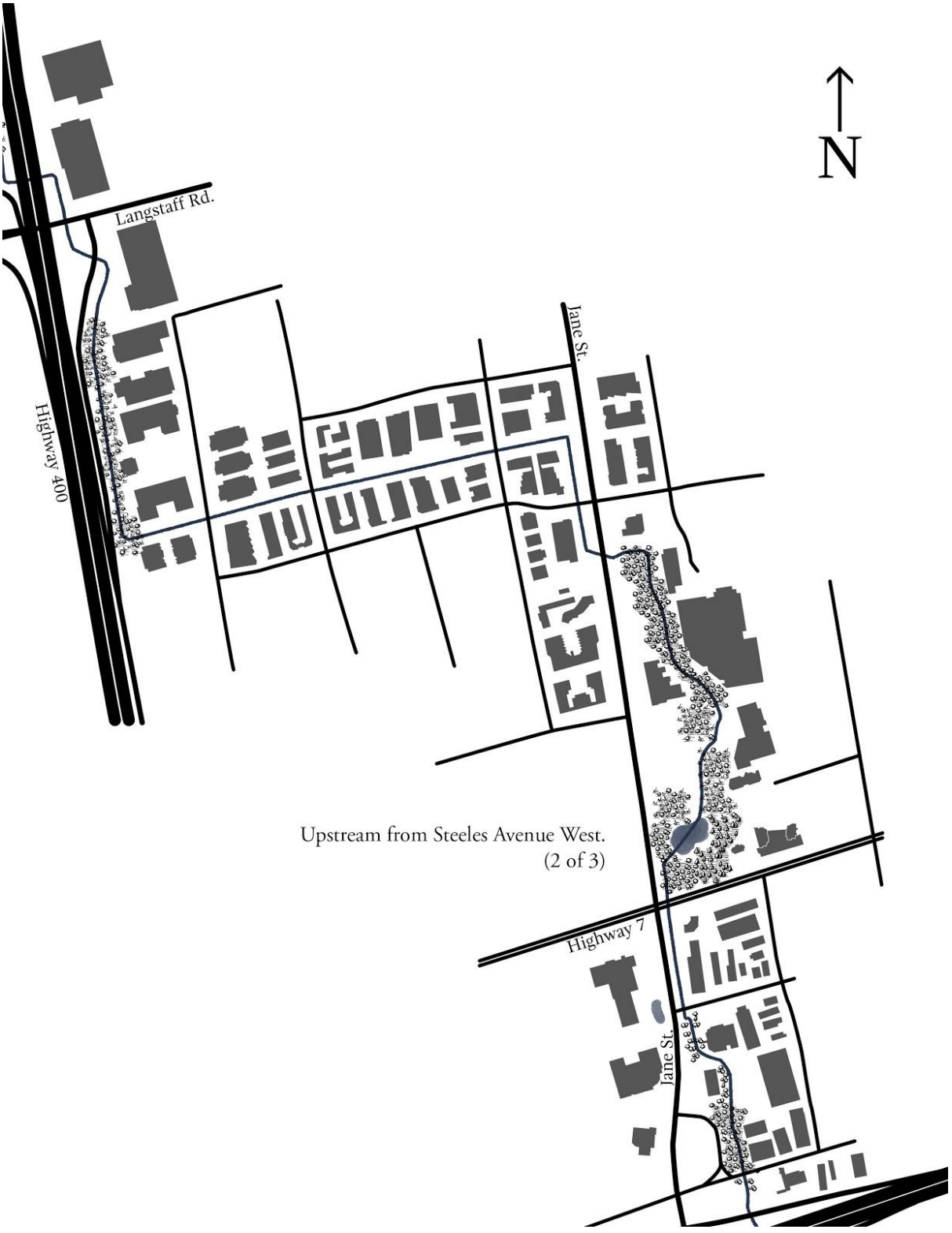
I let the conclusion hang for a moment. "The problems with which we're grappling have in part been created by old solutions to problems. Careful technical intervention can go a long way to addressing these, but we need more than infrastructure, more than policy to support these changes. We need new stories, and with them the ability to read both new ones and old. To tell a good story is hard, and like state-of-the-art flood controls, they too can have unintended consequences or unfortunate externalities. They gain momentum; eventually becoming as easy to shift as kilometers of combined sewer or countless tons of concrete and rebar.

"Our story isn't one of those. It's a foray, it's an attempt, it's a model built from scrounged materials. It's a pile of open questions with very few answers, which I realize doesn't make for a particularly satisfying story. But there isn't a moral or a conclusion to Black Creek, either. It persists. Chaotically stubborn, mercurial and vulnerable; yet it persists."

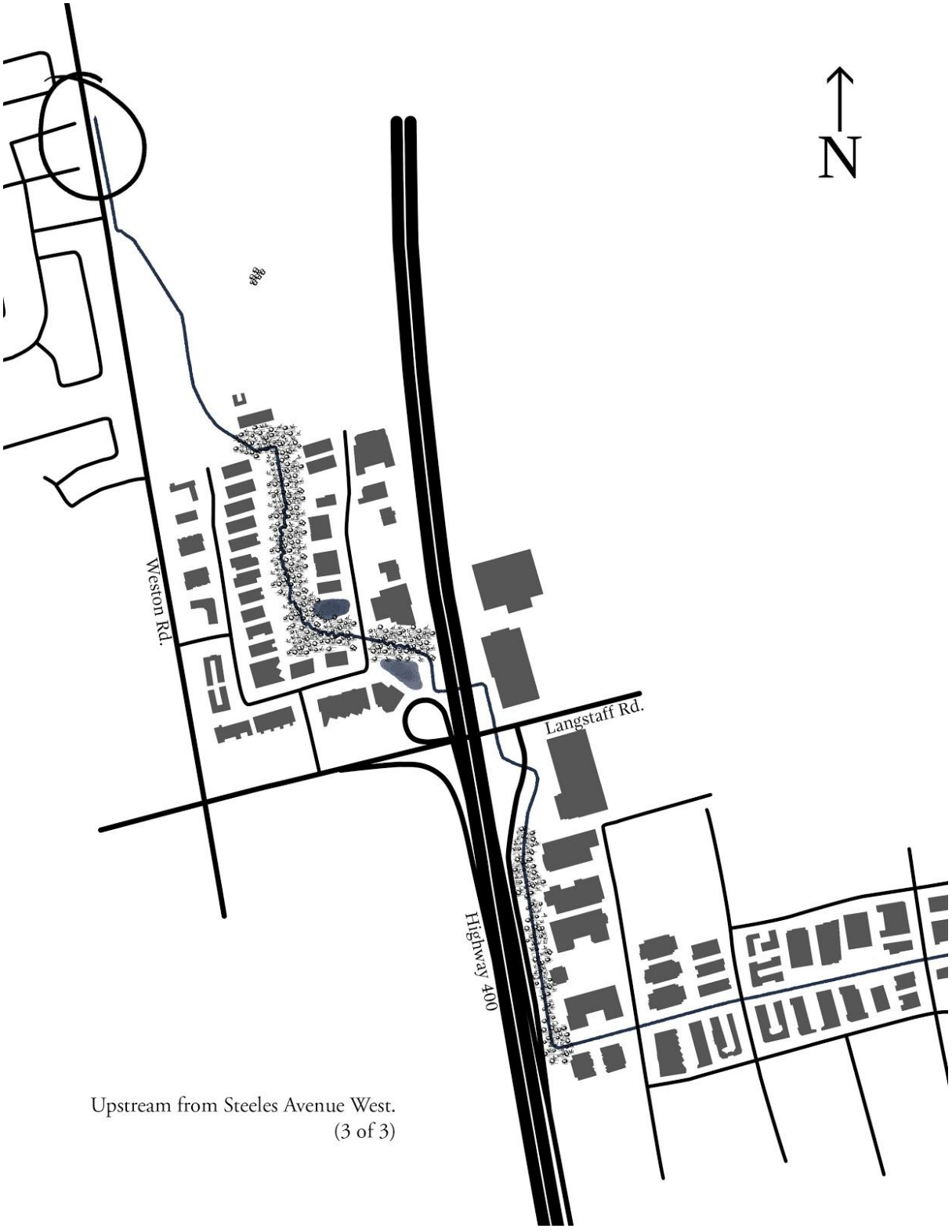
As I'd promised, the going is difficult for a while, but we're able to forge a route through the heavy brush together. We skirt a mown lawn to find a gravel path which a sign asks us not to walk down. Since we're not supposed to be here at all, let's say that we do. The path vanishes under the intersection of Jane St. and Steeles Avenue West. We slip into perpetual twilight, damp and dank under the bridge. When the creek reemerges to the north, we find ourselves outside of the historical northern boundary of Toronto. Here the creek is made to change again, it shifts, and becomes something entirely different: more tentative, more dependent, more constrained, but through all this, all the more stubbornly present.



Upstream from Steeles Avenue West.
(1 of 3)



Upstream from Steeles Avenue West.
(2 of 3)



Upstream from Steeles Avenue West.
(3 of 3)

5. Upstream from Steeles Avenue West.

We walk through a gap in the chain-link fence that surrounds the northern reaches of the Pioneer Village. We slip through it, and easily climb over the dirt ridge and the train tracks it supports. We break out of the contained narrative of the heritage village and stumble into another one, droning on and on. One that we've been reading alongside this tentative one through which we're finding our way. This other one—I can almost feel it—has interwoven with our story, with the physicality of the creek, it has given us our thoughts, it has written and been written by our language. The trap is that we don't usually think of it as a story.

The full heat of a Toronto summer hits us like a wall; the air once again still and heavy. We follow the narrow creek for a ways, it lies swerving and sinuous in a tattered meadow. The ground ahead is torn up, all sand and dust. Atop a broad plateau the finishing touches are being put on a sleek building. "This is the Highway 407 station for the Toronto Transit Committee's Spadina-line subway extension. The extension adds six stations to the northern end of the line, expanding the reach of the subway system some eight kilometers, in order to facilitate public transit into and out of the core."

Black Creek channel had to be moved a little to accommodate the new station. It was just nudged a little, moving some inconvenient bends, realigning the channel with the requirements of the facility, to be made compatible with the 'naturalized sustainable landscape'.[45], [46]

"Public transit is a democratizing force. The relocation of Black Creek was done according to the environmental requirements established by the government and the TRCA. I remain ever hesitant to question these narratives, as I have grown out of them, and benefit from them constantly. Yet I feel like doing so here is wise, perhaps even necessary. When we return to the city in which we live, then we can compromise with the necessities of the world as it is. For now, I'll make few concessions.

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[45] Toronto Transit Commission, "Notice of Preparation of an Addendum Report to the Highway 7 Corridor and Vaughan North-South Link Environmental Assessment & Response to Conditions of Approval Subway Alignment Optimization Report," last modified December 03, 2009, accessed July 02, 2017. http://www.ttc.ca/PDF/About_the_TTC/AppendixP_Record_of_Consultation.pdf.

[46] Toronto Transit Commission, "Highway 407 Station," accessed July 02, 2017. https://www.ttc.ca/Spadina/Stations/Highway_407_Station/index.jsp.

The creek vanishes in a concrete box tunnel under Jane Street. The big tunnel seems like overkill for the thin trickle that flows through in this far upstream, but it was built well after the hard lessons of Hurricane Hazel. Whether this will sustain the story through the building tumult of climate change is an open question.

We cross at a perilous intersection, the newly-installed traffic lights still shrouded in black. To return to the stream, again, we must pass through the grounds of Beechwood Cemetery. We do so discretely.

A narrow paved road gets us most of the way to a small oblong pond with a fountain in the centre. When we find the creek, it has been diverted to the very edge of the property, wedged between pond and bristling woods. The creek wends its way northeast through thick brush and grasses, its banks mucky, silted, and unstable. We push through the dense underbrush, avoiding—as best we can—thistles, wild rose, hawthorn, honeylocust, and anything else that might hurt us. "I've never walked this way before. It always seemed too difficult, but this seems like a special occasion, doesn't it?"

When we finally get to the mouth of the tunnel under the highway, I'm dismayed. It's a large square tunnel, like the one under Jane, but the light on the far side is small, like a postage stamp, slightly off centre, up and to the right. The tunnel must be incredibly long. "Getting here was so difficult, crashing through the bush out of the cemetery. I don't want to turn back, do you?"

At first, it's not so bad. The water is shallow and cool, four inches at most. The footing is easy: slightly slippery but perfectly flat. The brilliant light from the day outside still floods the tunnel around us. I affect the mien of a tour guide. "So, right now we're under the 407, the toll highway for which the subway station we passed earlier is named." My voice pitches up at the end of the sentence, enthusiastic. "It was built by the provincial government and opened after a decade of construction in 1997. However, it was leased to a private consortium shortly thereafter by a conservative provincial government seeking to cut whatever could be cut.[47] You see, ma-" My toe catches a seam in the concrete and I stumble slightly, kicking up water as I catch myself on the cold, dark wall. Suddenly I seem less in the mood to play tour guide, and I trail off. We walk in the gathering darkness, the water swilling around our boots, the gentle current tugging at our steps.

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[47] **Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, s.v., "Ontario Highway 407," accessed June 24, 2017.**

The bright speck of daylight at the far end constantly beckons us onward, but never seems to grow any larger. After an interminable while, the tunnel slowly grows light again. We're disgorged on the northern side of the highway. The mouth of the tunnel is feathered with grasses, the shore nearby, stocked with uniformly sized trees. I catch your eye, my face wan. "Well, huh. That's not something you do every day, huh? Want to, y'know, sit a spell? Celebrate not being down there in the dark any more?" We climb up onto the shore and sit, trailing our booted feet in the stream. I take a deep draught from my water bottle.

I'm slightly refreshed but still shaken, and I still feel the weight of all the way we've come. The expressway traffic behind us is loud and abrasive; I sigh and suggest we continue, if only to get away from it. Not far upstream a rusted truck rattles over a bridge, its load creaking and jouncing. The air here isn't great: a fug of exhaust, and something plasticky. More pleasant are the undertones, of sour clay, rotting wood, and the wet breath of leaves. We walk alongside the creek towards the road. The sparse understory is dense with litter, discarded tires, empty plastic bottles, eroded nuggets of polystyrene.

We walk across Peelar Avenue after checking both ways for more trucks. To our right sprawls light industrial; mostly automotive, it seems. Wrecking yards, garages, car part fabrication, laid out along roads with weird compound names like Maplecrete, Creditstone and Freshway. Standing out as well are the occasional hotel or convention centre, peddling comfort and luxury between crushed metal, dead freeway lanes, and a dirty, scrubby creek. Somewhere off to the west, behind empty green lawns and parking lots stand massive chain stores—think IKEA—and slightly farther afield, the headquarters of the TRCA.

North of Peelar, we pause, leaning over the metal railing above the creek. The channel is too steep, too dense with foliage, with metal mesh blocks filled with stone, with outfalls from storm drains. We would have to swing machetes, to labour for every inch. Instead I suggest that we follow from a distance.

Walking along the gravel shoulder that leads up to Jane Street isn't much more pleasant. It's an unusual feeling; we'd left the stream farther behind in the ravines to the south, but here, only twenty metres away, it feels like we're in another world. Even after following this thing for thirty kilometres, it's so easy to forget it, to lose it behind a wall of green, here in the stultifying din of suburbia. Though somehow, between the two of us, we remind each other of where we're trying to go.

Pressed between the traffic along Jane St. and the steep ditch than holds Black Creek, we slowly approach Highway 7: a major arterial, currently sporting most of a new dedicated bus lane. We pause and for a while and wait for the light to change. Directly opposite us lies a long block of grass and trees, though they're occasionally interrupted by signs advertising at least three different upcoming condominium developments. To the northwest, the land rises gently, spreading out a large undeveloped lot before us. Just barely visible, down along Highway 7, is a lozenge-shaped building: the aboveground portion of the impending Vaughan Metropolitan Centre subway station: the terminus for the new line extension.

We cross the wide boulevard and contend with the demands of the woodlot, wading through grasses and negotiating the rolling slopes that surround the stream. To our right, the long shadow of the already-built Expo City condos retreats as the sun rises. Ahead, brightly coloured construction cranes loom over a glassy pond fringed with reeds.

"This place is being developed so rapidly; it's something to see when you're standing somewhere that feels so old, so static, outside of the frantic shift of the city. I start to look for all the distant forces that are being brought to bear on the land here, overpowering the slow action

of erosion and deposition, of growth and decay. One looks for what forces are guiding this frantic growth. Most people are seeking financial gain: security and comfort for them and their families. This ranges from the developers building condos to the people buying them, from local politicians seeking reelection to the business owners who hope to profit off the the new 'metropolitan centre'.

"This scrum of construction is an accelerated version of the slow sprawl that originally covered this area with networks of roads and huge warehouses. A huge trainyard, CN MacMillan, was built in the late 1950's. It stood out starkly from the surrounding farmland, located near a junction of two major rail lines, but over the coming decades a slow stain of industrial businesses spread out from the yard: first to the east, but eventually to the south and and last, to the west. These businesses have not been kind to the entities that depend upon the creek for sustenance, or for a place to live. The sometimes-toxic materials that are made or used or pass through here have ways of sneaking into drains and sewers and from there into the creek.

"Now once again the vagaries of urbanism have introduced more rail lines to the land around Black Creek. Instead of covering the land with warehouses to benefit from the proximity to a rail classification yard, this time around developers are rapidly building condos, office towers, restaurants and entertainment venues. What this means for the creek remains unclear, but I am not particularly sanguine.

"While I expect it will be treated with a lighter touch than it has in the past, I fear that it be folded into the type of vacuous green urbanism that gives the appearance of Nature but is too tightly controlled to allow for the types of unpredictability and change which are the hallmark of such places."[48,49]

We walk past the yawning pits out of which the 'The Met' condos are slowly sprouting. we round a bend and the ravine tightens up again. On our left, a dense wall of verdure. On our right, a literal wall, grey, four storeys straight up, interrupted by vertical panes of glass every twenty metres or so. It looks impossible, science-fictional, this massive thing looming over us, casting its long shadow across the ravine. We stumble over a stack of collected driftwood and suddenly we're on a simple gravel road. Without this trail having been broken, it would almost be

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[48] **Joern Langhorst, "Re-Presenting Transgressive Ecologies: Post-Industrial Sites as Contested Terrains,"** *Local Environment* **19, no. 10 (2014): 1121-1123.**

[49] **The Corporation of the City of Vaughan, "Black Creek Renewal Project," accessed July 09, 2017. https://www.vaughan.ca/projects/projects_and_studies/environmental_assessment_studies/Pages/Black-Creek-Renewal-Municipal-Class-EA.aspx.**

impossible to navigate here. This dense-packed ravine is so hard to traverse or to interpret. The few pockets of forest here stand in stark contrast those shot through with walking paths and game trails, or to the sidewalk-like concrete trench even further away. There are barely any few tracks in the soft mud that lines the streambed; just the odd scratchings left by raccoons' little clawed hands.

"The fiction of Man vs. Nature is ever difficult to avoid. In the face of the rapacity of capitalist modernity it feels as though one needs to take sides. But to do so is to enter into a losing game. The only way to win is not to play; there are no sides. There are only actions taken by alliances of entities—planner-architect-engineer-labourer-machinery-gasoline—which impact other groups—water-sediment-algae-fish. These names I've ginned up are fragments; they are by their nature incomplete."[50]

The gravel road along which we've been walking splits from Black Creek. The road veers uphill towards a chained gate while the stream vanishes into the undergrowth. I turn to you,

[50] **Jane Bennett,** *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things,* **(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 22-28**

saying, "I don't think I have the energy to push through another tangled forest today, nor do I have the time or the knowledge to attempt to form an alliance—as it were—with the plants and earth ahead of us. Shall we take advantage of the roads and sidewalks for a while?"

We help each other climb the chain-link gate. Half of it is grounded in a heap of loose gravel, making climbing it a lot easier. To tread pavement again is a relief after the rough soil, unpredictable marshes and stubborn thickets through which we've just passed. The sidewalk along Talman Court is shaded by a regular row of mature pines, all stripped of their lower branches. I lead us diagonally across a huge, empty parking lot. This way is quicker but exposes us to the full intensity of the day's brutal heat, bouncing back up at us from the asphalt below. When we get back to it, we cross Jane Street at a traffic light for once; a special occasion to mark our final trip across the road.

We return to a built channel again, this one a wide V, slopes covered in grasses and stippled with in ragweed, white sweet-clover, bladder campion, staghorn sumac, the occasional young pine tree. The water in the creek below us is barely visible now, the stream narrow, entirely obscured by tall reeds.

As we walk, we fall into a daze, pushed down under the sun's glowering weight. We do not stop moving, we can't now, any more than the creek can. Like low-budget cartoons from my childhood, the same three background features pass us by again, and again. Bristling thistles, a picnic table with an ashtray, an empty loading dock. A sign on a wall that reads "Concord Shading Systems". The grass rustles and crunches under our feet and every eleven paces we step on a crinkly plastic bottle, and every seventeen on a crumbling rusted can. We pass under a road, via a muddy tunnel, then get back up and traverse the off-camber slope.

Our feet find their way even if we're not entirely aware of it. We've fallen silent, walking ever onward, eyes swimming from point to point. The grass here is flattened down slightly, though if this is wind or a trail for a groundhog or a raccoon, I don't know. Milkweed, queen anne's lace, a chained-shut gate between us and an alley that runs between warehouses. "Continental Cosmetics", "Backtrack Railway Services Ltd". Someone, a long time ago, dumped a load of trash here, dyes faded by the sun, papers dissolved into sticky-looking flecks. We run out of sloping meadow and duck under another road, through a tunnel that holds more muck than water.

Back to the slope, walking along the rail-straight creek. Ragweed, smartweed, foxtail barley. It looks maybe like people walked here before, there's something like a trail. It leads

between two adolescent pines, we follow, the long needles brushing our skin, and the path vanishes. We keep walking, minds quiet. "No-Glare Architectural Glass". Under a roadway, in a tunnel the mud is pocked with footprints and dotted with spoor. Raccoons, deer, maybe coyotes?

We stumble slightly as the channel bends, after an eternity. We're out from the canyon of warehouses, replaced with a broad expressway on our left-hand side: Highway 400. Southbound traffic rushes past; the cars on our side are slowed to a crawl.

The ditch through which we're walking is broader here, the earth along the bottom soft and marshy. The footing gets ever trickier, and before long the thin creek disappears once more into a small concrete tunnel jutting from the side of an off-ramp. We've already walked through four tunnels today, including the long dark under the 407. These are even smaller: we'd either have to crawl through the creek or walk, bent double, backs scraping along concrete. We exchange a glance and wordlessly decide to take the easier route.

We trek up the steep hill leading to Langstaff Rd. and hang a left once we summit it, picking last year's burrs from our clothes. Langstaff passes over the 400 on a four-lane bridge with a narrow sidewalk on one side. We don't see any other pedestrians as we cross. The land is so flat that even from this slight rise we can see the plodding rhythm of Vaughan spreading out for kilometers.

"Walking through suburbia always seems wrongheaded. It takes forever to get anywhere. The lights are slow to change and walking across these wide boulevards seems somehow ridiculous. The buildings are set so far back from the roads, untold acres of mown grass lie useless and dull between empty sidewalks and their weathered, efficiency-chic facades." Eventually we regain the Black Creek. The place where we're standing must be busy *some* time, but right now we're the only two humans around. The white box warehouses that line this u-shaped double cul-de-sac are dark and still.

The water of Black Creek is almost impossible to find, but its effects are clear to see. The droning rhythm of warehouse, parking lot, warehouse, parking lot is broken by a broad, shallow valley. Its slopes are dense with sumac and dotted with small swamp white oak and eager young poplar. These give way to broad flat meadows of tall grasses waving in the intermittent breeze. In their turn, the grasses get taller leading up to a dense line of tall cattails, demarcating the body of the creek. We're warded off the way downstream by a dense wall of Canada thistles, much to the relief of a colony of red-winged blackbirds, shouting their agitation at our sudden presence.

On the other side of Creditview Road this scene is mirrored, and made slightly stranger by the line of pale, silent buildings which ring this vivid meadow. We find a gap in the palisade of thistles; a berm between the creek and one of the many stormwater ponds that crowd around the stream here. The ridge is dense with wildflowers—creeping buttercup, tufted vetch, common mullein. These are being tended to by a solicitous swarm of bees. We wade through these proceedings; the bees don't seem to mind and go about their business.

Down in the meadow the ground is dry but slightly uneven and wholly obscured by the shifting grasses. The stream is probably thin enough to jump across, but the bulrushes are so thick that one might bounce right off them. This makes our going a little difficult, occasionally having to navigate around thin lines of water from stormwater ponds and sewer outfalls. The din from the highway is lost in the wind as it churns the grass around us. The shadows cast by some welcome cumulus that break the heat of the late summer sun. We're almost there.

We break from the open loop of the U of warehouses and the land changes again. The creek remains invisible: a line of reeds, the occasional sound of flowing water, but nonetheless

there. Signage warns against parking, trespassing, dumping; we might be doing a little of the middle one, but there is nobody here to notice, let alone mind. The line of reeds cuts through a gravel business, then separates a long group of personal storage lockers from a scrapyard: cars and trucks lined up in rows, stripped of useful parts, slowly disintegrating.

We pick up a faint trail through the dense greenery, it leads to the top of a short ridge. The stream traces the ridge to our left, separating us from a garden centre; low piles of earth and gravel spilling towards the obscured water. Ahead is a massive vacant lot, covered thickly with more of the same hardy plants through which we've been trekking. A flock of distant birds wheels in the clear air; traffic scuds by on the now-distant freeway. A rickety-looking metal tower, dotted with cellphone transceivers seems to sprout from a thick clump of stout willows. The sun breaks through the cloud cover; we can see their shadows flow—eerie-fast—across the field.

This scene slowly falls away behind us as we press onwards, heads down, feet heavy. We cross the creek using an overgrown driveway, fenced off from Weston Road to prevent car access; but we can easily wade through the bushes, and I only find a few nettles, wincing a little and cursing under my breath.

Here we follow the creek by walking the gravel shoulder along Weston. There's a sidewalk on the far side, but nowhere to safely cross; the moderate traffic is doing at least seventy. We pass a second gravel driveway, squeezing the thin creek into a culvert, then another, for a dirt lot filled with ornamental stone for fancy gardens. The creek vanishes into a culvert again. This time under a paved road, access to a strip mall: fast food, drive-through ATM, head shop, convenience store.

We walk alongside the grassy ditch for a full minute before you notice that it doesn't reappear. You pull me back to the spot where it last vanishes, into that dented culvert. Here, signage for a garden centre, for mini bin rentals. Here, the grass has been mown, scattering a shaggy, dry, dead mess everywhere. Here, we can only see as far as the nearby horizon; a line of utility poles collapses to a point. Northbound cars glide past us, heading home.

I cast my eyes about for Black Creek, but I can't find it.

Conclusion

Let's begin with water. Lots of it, mostly frozen solid. It gets warmer out and the ice starts to melt, to flow across the land which has been scoured bare by all this ice. This land is variable in sand, gravel, silt and clay. Some of it is easily washed away by all this newly liquid water, some of it resists this. Now that small channels have been formed, more water tends to these, making them slowly larger. The slow writhing work of streambeds carves out a chain of valleys and ravines that fall a little more than a hundred meters from the new wetlands where the water convenes to the place where it melds with a larger flow of water in a larger ravine.

This happens for a very long time. Plants and animals slowly spread north, covering the land. These drink from the water with lapping mouths or sipping roots. They fall into it when they die, or they fall into it *and* die, becoming wood and flesh, becoming food, becoming chemicals. They live in the water singly or in schools. Seasons have become a roughly stable cycle again: snows in the winter, meltwater in the spring, thunderstorms in the summer and fall. There are humans here too for this very long time, but not as many as there will be, much later. They eat the plants and animals that live here because of the water. They grow food upon the rich plains which are renewed by floods, the water carrying important nutrients for their crops.

This also happens for a long time. Sometimes there are fires, set by the people or by lightning. Big storms flood the stream, knocking down trees, washing away crops. There is room and time for the stream to cut new routes for itself. Species shift and change: sometimes there are more of one, sometimes more of another. Tall trees and fast deer, audacious robins and quiet mosses live out their different lives on this land.

It sounds like a story, doesn't it? Something that *might* have happened to somebody else, a long time ago. It makes a sort of sense: one thing leads to another and then to another.

Most of the stories on which I've grown up came from a time when things seemed orderly, or at least from such a time where an illusion of order could make for a compelling, believable tale. I don't know how to tell stories about what is happening now; to describe a loaf of bread on a table is to describe wheat gene patents or to describe famine in Sudan. To tell a story about something as I experience it has become an impossible task; the illusions of easy

everyday existence have been shattered by a creeping awareness of our enmeshment with other entities, some of which are gargantuan systems that far exceed us.[51]

Yet we make sense of the world around us with stories. As Thomas King has famously said, "the truth about stories is that that's all we are".[52] The stories of which King speaks are different from the laws and the novels and the movies and the worldviews that I've taken in, but mine still built my understanding of the world.[53]

What stories, what ways of thinking can help us manage our lives as the world changes around us? If the shape of my life—as an early-middle-aged able-bodied white man, raised in a middle class family in a wealthy nation—is built from old stories, then what does it mean for me now that it has become clear that these stories no longer make sense?[54]

The answer—as I see it—is to make and tell new stories that tell about us and our place in the world. We can find the components of these stories by listening to others, the ones with which we are so closely tied. Listening to other humans, to hydrocarbons, to rivers, to anything that's talking.

To hear and understand another human person can often be hard. To hear and understand something nonhuman or nonliving is all the more difficult, and in so doing it is often all the easier to project onto them the preconceptions we all carry with us. I believe that a prolonged, stubborn and in-depth engagement with these entities can yield a familiarity and build a mutual understanding. Philosophical or aesthetic engagement is one option. Scientific approaches work as well. The closeness that comes with daily living-with or dependence upon another entity fosters yet another kind of connection.

How can we translate between such diverse entities, to preserve what is important for them while making it understandable for us? What can we glean from our old narratives that is still worth bringing with us, from the Bildungsroman, from the Bible, from democracy, from neoliberalism? How might language shift to accommodate these new tales, these new understandings? I do not know what these new stories will sound like, what form they will take,

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[51] **Amitav Ghosh,** *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* **(Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016, Kindle edition), chap. 1, sec. 7-8.**

[52] **Thomas King,** *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* **(Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 5.**

[53] **Ibid., 22-29.**

[54] **One attempt to answer this question is on repugnant display in right-wing populist politics, in their purported striving to return to a time when everything was 'simpler and better'. That such a time ever existed is of course a pernicious lie, but it's understandably appealing under the current circumstances.**

or what our lives—and the lives of so many others—might look like if they were told for centuries.

I would be remiss if I didn't return to Black Creek, at least for a moment. Black Creek, whom I've spent so much time trying to know. I tried to tell a story about you, a story that of water and the land around it and the processes that shaped that land and the people who live on it and trees and climate change and bridges and hurricanes and so many things. I hope my footprints and words do you more justice than the story we've told you so far, in concrete and rebar, in salt and iron, in parkland and pipeline, in (sometimes) generative neglect. Mine is a more modest tale, but I hope I've caught a glimpse of you somewhere.

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