

The Henceforward Episode 16

Waterways and Ways to the Water

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Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast about connections between Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island. Here, we come to the table to discuss settler colonialism and anti-blackness, but more to imagine shared features and the practices of theory and care that it will take to get there, to get elsewhere.

Narrator: Before we begin, we wish to acknowledge the land on which we have put together this episode of The Henceforward. This land is the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this land is home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have this opportunity to work and live in this territory as guests.

As we engage in discussions of waterways in this place, we are thinking about the way we speak about, listen to, and acknowledge the water of Toronto.

In this episode, we present a series of meditations on water and waterways as place and placing. These meditations explore the rivers that continue to run under the city, their sounds, meanings, and implications for how we think about this place. This episode brings these waterways to the surface.

Sandi: Welcome to The Kitchen Table where Indigenous folks and Black folks come to meet to discuss some very serious topic. I'm Sandi Wemigwase.

Sandy: I am Sandy Hudson.

Jade: I am Jade Nixon.

Cornel: I'm Cornel Grey.

Michelle: I'm Michelle Forde.

Megan: And I'm Megan Scribe.

Jade: I guess what's really on my mind, when I think water, the ways that all the Black feminists use water in their work and yeah, it's really on my mind to think through the ways that water, particularly Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic, the ways that water kind of -- or can be used to symbolize like Jacqui Alexander's conceptualization of palimpsest time or Christina Sharpe's residence time to the way that water can function as a bridging between the path that's not yet path I guess. I'm still working through it clearly, but I think water has a really good symbolizing to deconstruct this linear chronological settler kind of time that we function in and with.

Cornel: I think for a lot of people, water is a way to I guess it's nostalgic in some ways. It's a way to I guess place oneself within the realm of home. I can't think of any specific names right now, but some feminist scholars talk about water in relation to the fact that we come from water, and so in certain ways water is home to us.

I think it's Dionne Brand who says, water is another country, so I'm also interested in thinking about how we can think of it as another -- we think about how to try to be or how to exist in the world potentially, but also how water allows us to -- like it's a connection to land different places, which I guess I'm trying to gesture to like relations, because I guess we often think of things or people as being distinct and water kind of disrupts that kind of narrative potentially.

Jade: Like transnational relationships too, like a bridging.

Megan: The Cree work for my community, Norway House Cree Nation, is Kinosao Sipi, which means fish water -- sorry, fish river. My whole life, and our whole lives are oriented around water. Water flows through every single memory of my entire existence, and is the thread that holds all these memories together.

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I remember living with my grandparents in one of the older reserve homes, and it didn't actually have pipes running through the house, so our water that we had come in a tank that was delivered to us through water trucks or collective from the river.

We treated that water like it was very, very precious as it was. When we would have baths, they would be like sponge baths for example because we couldn't afford to waste it. I think for that reason, I have a lot of respect for it in that way. Then of course, growing up on a reserve, water wasn't always available for drinking, so a lot of times growing up, we purchased it from the store. Nine times out of ten, you can bet that Pepsi or soda's going to be cheaper than filtered water.

At the time growing up, I didn't really think too much about it, but when I moved to Toronto, and I was just getting my water for free from the tap, I was like holy crap. I can't believe we pay for this, and what's more is growing up, I had class privilege that allowed me to buy it. I can't believe that some people couldn't buy it, some people had to drink soda because it was cheaper, it was what they could afford.

Michelle: I think just building on your consciousness, Megan, of the value of water from your early memories and your appreciation of it, I think about the ways in which water has been commodified, and who has access to it and who doesn't, and how that just reflects, again, the broader parts of the colonial project.

I think about Detroit where large numbers of people are being charged for poison water, and the activism around that within communities, and yet, it was an issue at one point in time, and now it's kind of fallen off and yet people are still living with that on a daily basis.

And even closer to home, I think about the fact that people are surprised. I had a conversation with a group of educators about boil water advisories, and how there are many reserve communities on boil water advisories and have been so for long periods of time. There was astonishment in that discussion, and I thought how is it that so many people don't know what's happening in our very own community.

People often will look to India and the commodification of water there by multinationals like Coca-Cola, taking the water away, but it's easier to look at the problem over there, than it is to look at what we're doing. We're all complicit and right here in our own country.

Megan: I think something that's important to keep in mind as we're reflecting on who has access to water and who doesn't is that there sometimes can be this scarcity mentality when it comes to media attention, so if there's a lot of media around Flint, Michigan for example, people and communities who haven't had water for a very long time might be afraid that oh, why are you giving attention to this community when we haven't had water for decades?

But I don't know if that kind of thinking is always useful. I think what we need to consider are the larger structures in place that disallow all of these different Indigenous and racialized communities from having clean, potable water. It's definitely a really complex issue that needs to be unpacked more but that's just a jumping off point.

[End of Kitchen Table Talk]

Narrator: Bodies encrypted, land inscripted by Simone Weir.

Simone: The sound of striking Flint to ignite a flame, #FlintWaterCrisis.

Dr. Mays states in his blog post that "Flint, Michigan is located on the Saginaw Trail, linking Detroit to Saginaw. The people of the Three Fires – Ottawa, Potawatomi, and Ojibwe -- live in the area. The Anishinaabe called Flint Muscatawing and the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw renames the land Grand Traverse and deeded allotment to 11 Anishinaabe individuals who were then later removed."

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Bodies encrypted led into the straits of veins are signals of past, current, and future pains. Unleash through the fluid that connects and divides a territory marked in the settlers' eyes.

Large structures were erected to produced manifests at a rapid pace dispossessing beings and herding them to a separate place where the lines of the colonized that were dueling in the air, only to be drowned, much to their great despair by the calculated efforts of contrast and definition hailed, seared in the flesh of future plan to be jailed, and bodies policed on multi tiers of the state eroding vocal pipes, bickering sealed the faith.

What is to be said about manufacturing, separation, and decimation that can only be the gathering of bodies speaking to each other via emancipation of the systems like water, which is shapeless and take on many forms, decontaminating the contaminated, rewriting norms, a deep remember is needed to transform and wade through the waters. I ask you, which peace will you be in this existing mass charade?

Land inscripted submerged into the vast and open sea, I see all the wonders open to me. In slow motion, they appear to be occupying property.

Listen. Put your ear to the ground. Hear my heart beat. Feel my tentacles reach out. See me shout. Do you hear me? I speak to you through the visible and invisible. I yearn to connect with you, but you ignore me. You take advantage. You disregard, for if it were not for me, you would have no place to stand. Divide me with your invisible grid.

Tales of trickery and folly, sites of secrets kept, stories found, tragedies spilled. I am the peace that you often overlook, soil eroded. Fruits imploded by lead running the streams beneath my surface, nurtured by power, buried traditions birth natural intuition. Floating.

Water flows. Land shifts. Bodies ignite. Memories live through whispers carried by the wind.

Narrator: A meditation by Erin Soros.

Erin: Years ago, Indigenous people shaped this trees largest branch. I learn this history through the First Story walking tour. The tree stands in what is now High Park beside a skate rink where children are laughing.

It points walkers toward the southwest where a river runs with a lake lips the shore. It grew to express a community sense of direction. In this way, the tree belies the boundary between the human and the natural, between the past and the present.

I don't know which nation shaped it. I don't know what it meant precisely for those who once found the surety of its branch. I don't know what people see when they pass here today. You are not lost. You are on your way. Someone has been here before you.

[0:15:01]

Narrator: The following is a conversation between Dr. Karyn Recollet and Greer Brabazon.

Greer: I sat down with Dr. Karyn Recollet in the Women and Gender Studies Institute to talk about her work and thoughts about water in this city, and as part of larger movements against settler colonialism. In these clips, we talk about different ways of activating water, and Dr. Recollet shares reflections on creating meaningful relationships to water through this type of work.

This interview was in response to a series of conversations that occurred about a water-focused artist residency with Jaime Black in Philosopher's Walk at the University of Toronto, a park space over Taddle Creek which is now an underground waterway in Toronto.

Karyn: My name is Karyn Recollet. I am Cree, originally from Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, and have grown up mostly in southern Ontario. I work in Women and Gender Studies Institute and teach courses that are related to some of the threads of research that I'm doing which is on decolonial aesthetics and thinking about artmaking and cultural production, and the impacts that cultural production might have on thinking about our relationships to each other, and thinking about what may be an urban-based critical land pedagogy might look like. That's sort of where my research is focused on.

Land is very interesting and overflowing its own boundedness that has been the creation and the production of sort of foreign nation states and their cartographies and their topographies, and their molding and shaping and constraining of the natural world.

Yeah, so while what they weren't able to do is completely get rid of the underground waterways, because as Jill Carter has shared with me, there's certain moments and certain -- specifically in the spring where we have flooding over of these spaces of you know, like for example, one of the fields at King's College Circle, the field there gets flooded over every year.

It's just kind of like these hauntings or these reminders and these present sayings of land and all of its overflow kind of gesturing towards like getting us to think about I guess reminding us of what our responsibilities are, and that we are connected very much to that overflow, we are a part of that overflow. We are a part of that overflow.

The overflow of bodies, thinking about Indigenous bodies, moving about in spaces, we are that overflow as well. There are these connections between the ways that we can think about Indigenous bodies, Indigenous lives, and overflow is that we overflow ourselves, and the land overflows itself too.

For me, thinking about decolonial aesthetics, and thinking about urban land overflowing its own like the boundaries, and the constraints is also about attending to thinking about the violence towards Indigenous bodies, towards Black and Indigenous bodies and thinking about how I guess the ways in which the overflow of our bodies is a natural state and that our present saying in Indigenous territories, for example, here in Mississaugas of the Credit and Dish with One Spoon territory, Haudenosaunee territory is to I guess think about the ways in which indignities are activated here in this city.

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It's not so much just like gesturing towards the present saying of Indigenous people, but the activations of Indigenous people and the connections that Indigenous folks have with the land here really intervenes a lot of the logics or the ill logics behind settler colonial violence towards land and towards human beings.

Michelle Murphy is really doing some awesome interesting work and talking about the toxicities of water, and how that we have these towards thinking about the protection of waterways. These waterways have toxins. Rather than thinking about protecting water in its pure state is toxic water where they have protection as well, and thinking about that in terms of bodies to human beings because of the toxins that we carry as well.

That's really gotten me thinking about decolonial love on different layers and different levels. Michelle Murphy's work has really got me thinking about that and about how do we fall in love again with our rupture selves. Part of that process of radically relating to land is falling in love again with our rupture selves and rupture lands, and holding space for that too, you know.

I think that's probably part of an urban Indigenous ethic too is how to fall in love with our rupture lands because it's been so paved over because in a lot of cases, the trees are sick or the sewage systems are toxic, so how do we love that? And there are ways. We've been talking about a portal project activating those portal spaces, those manholes. There are ways to fall in love with that rupture too, and to be in love with that rupture as well, and realize that that's sort of the path that we're on too, that we're in this together.

Water does have agency, and cannot be contained sort of by these narrative constructs. I feel like yes, there is urgency. I feel like urgency has done some amazing things in terms of activating communities specifically thinking about Standing Rock and specifically thinking about the water walks that Josephine Mandamin has took amazing leadership on.

I think that there's space for that and there's also space for thinking about falling in love with the toxicity. I think that all those different kinds of approaches, working

together, are absolutely necessary. I mean I think about the water walks, and this thought came to me from a talk that Andre Simpson had done here at the University of Toronto.

I was thinking about the water walks and Josephine Mandamin's water walks specifically as singing love songs to the water. I felt like these were sort of like ways of kind of gliffing decolonial towards water and towards the shoreline of water.

I feel like the water walks are also spaces for almost like a sonically gesturing towards our futures, where we can imagine a future were if we take care of these water ways, and if you put our collective energy towards these waterways, then perhaps, that is associated and intersected with taking care of each other. Singing protective songs towards each other.

I find these water walks incredible activations. I mean I've got friends who have lost toenails because they have been walking so much, and it's just like a normal thing for them. They're like, oh, yeah. My toenail fell off.

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I feel like the work and the labor that we're putting into this is super meaningful, and super helpful. I'm really glad that the water walkers are continuing this journey this April, this upcoming April. I think it's really important work.

The territorial acknowledgments that are happening, I believe are happening to these activations. In Toronto, we talk a lot about territorial acknowledgments, and even in the Toronto District School Board, our children are hearing territorial acknowledgment in school every day which is wonderful. But also thinking about the ways in which people are activating territorial acknowledgments on a daily, I think are also important.

I see that in kind of communities who are grieving, communities that are grieving these losses, and have continued to grieve these losses and hold space for each other that I think that these processes are being enacted in urban spaces as well. These are protocols and processes that are activating territory through bodies, through kinships, and the ways in which these kinships are belonging within the lands.

There's other layers, I mean, thinking about being a Cree person in this space, I'm always a visitor. What are my obligations? What are my responsibilities as a visitor to this territory within this Dish with One Spoon Treaty territory? There is incredibly opportunity to learn more about these protocols of radical relationship building that come from this particular territory. That's important to keep in mind too, like what those protocols are.

If the community is concerned about water, then that's something that I feel it's in my responsibility to think about too. Taking leadership is acknowledging the leaderships and sort of adapting your processes to what are the concerns of the people, the hosts in the territory in which you're living I think is important.

Yeah, and listening, and just listening without having to insert one's analysis or build a new theory or any of those things that we hold really high in academia, just having listening moments is part of those teachings, I believe, of what Josephine Madamin is doing, listening to the water, walking with the water, walking the shoreline. I think that listening is a skill. I think it's something that it's difficult to develop sometimes, but how important it is.

Narrator: A meditation on finding waterways by Greer Brabazon.

Greer: I'm walking right now down the street called Harrison, and coming up to the street called Roxton Road, and here apparently, is where two parts of the Garrison River used to converge. There's a bit of a hill going down, and then there's a school around the corner here so like a big field and with some [0: and things like that. But generally speaking, no markers or any indication that there were any waterways around here. No signs, any kind of indicators.

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When I look at the houses around, their lawns are quite steep, and they slope quite dramatically downwards, so this is definitely where I think a river could have been for sure. I'm trying to listen for any kind of sounds, water sounds, anything like that. The closest thing I can get to that is just these grates into the sewer, and that's pretty much it.

A few restaurants in the area. One of which is called The Lakeview and the other one which is called The Garrison. These places, these businesses named after what used to be here, but as I come up to Dundas St. now, can't see the lake. I can no longer see the lake there. There's a street, a couple of streets down just on the other side of Ossington, on the left side of Ossington called Lakeview which is I think where we used to be able to see right down to the lake, well, not anymore.

Right now, I am in the northwestern part of Trinity-Bellwoods Park, and right at the corner here at Shaw and Dundas streets, there is a sign that says Garrison Creek and Trinity-Bellwoods Park, and it's set sort of into the ground a little bit and into this little wall by the entrance where a few paths sort of come out from.

I'm thinking about marking waterways in the city, and the way that it erases Indigenous land in territory, these markings become incredibly particular to settler colonialism.

These colonial markings are very particular. They are in English, so part of the erasure of Indigenous land and territory and recognition of title is also the use of colonial language, and not using or recognizing Indigenous languages from this area.

Then this really interesting narrative I think comes out, because when I was looking at these articles and these Toronto-specific blogs that talk about these waterways, they all talk about them as though they're lost. In the title, and in the descriptions, they talk about these lost rivers.

I think that's a really interesting narrative that develops when thinking about marking waterways and thinking about where these flows used to be and still are underground, and these narrative of losing rivers as though we can no longer find them when that's not the case. We know where they are. We know because we buried over them, and then marked them, and the narrative of lost, I think is very settler colonial. It ties into this idea of discovery.

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So thinking about the ways that cities and settler colonialism in the state "rediscovers" these lost rivers and these lost spaces, and then makes claim to them, and so they found them.

Narrator: Thoughts on growing up with water by Sandi Wemigwase.

Sandi: I think that growing up like Michigan totally had an entire impact on my existence. There have been times when as an adult that's been like oh, I can move different places in the world, and one of the places that I would never want to move to is a place without access to water.

Growing up, the shores of Lake Michigan had a huge impact for me and how I place myself because I've always had access to like our fresh water lake, and I've always seen the sunset over a bay, like over water. It's really bizarre to me to go to places where the sun sets over land like one that is really weird and two, I'm also really used to it being the west side of me, so the water always being to the west.

Whenever I go places and the water is not to the west, for example, living here in Toronto has been a little bit of a disorienting experience because the water is not to the west, the water is to the south.

Trying to navigate around that and trying to remember where it is that the beach is at, where is the water at compared to where I'm at. Living in Toronto has been -- one of the reasons that I chose Toronto and chose to come to graduate school here at OISE is just because it's on Lake Ontario. It still connects me to the great lakes, and even the ten years I've spent in Southern California, where it's still I need to be connected to the water.

Now, the ocean is entirely different, but it was still water to the west of me, and it was still like water that I can go visit. It was also from the things that would bring me like a calming -- it has a calming effect on me. One of the things that I love to listen to is really just like waves crashing.

That's like one of my favorite things to do is really just to go be in the water, dip my toes in the water, just be in the water, feeling super stressed then the water calms me down. I think that that is definitely has -- that's just had a really large impact on me. I don't ever see myself living in a place where I don't have access to really the great lakes or water in it of itself. I can't imagine living in the planes. The plane is just not -- that's not it for me. I can't do that because there is no massive body of water next to me.

I think that people who have never seen the great lakes, you're missing out on something magnificent for one, but two, I don't think they understand like how large they are. You cannot see across Michigan. I can't see Wisconsin or from the western shore of Michigan. I think that they have never really thought about water could possibly be that big that you can't -- you could be in the water and not see land. That, I think, is probably one of the greatest parts.

Growing up on Lake Michigan has definitely had a very large impact on how I place myself or where I see myself, what it is that I want in my space, what it is that I want in my life, what it is that I want access to, and I think that that has been something that is formative. To me, water is just home. I would just like -- my favorite thing to do is to be in the lake. If I could just spend all summer in the lake like not the winter, obviously the summer, then that is definitely like where I would want to be.

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I don't think that the fact that we come from a womb, and there's water in there, that is not lost on me. I'm pretty sure that is why I think of it as home, because we all have those memories of being in that womb and being with our mothers, and being inside in this warm, comfy place, so I think being in a body of water is really the best place to be. It's the place where you're most free.

Narrator: Remembering the Etobicoke River by Kate Curtis.

Kate: To Dr. John Malloy, Director of Education, Toronto District School Board. The mouth of the Etobicoke River marks the beginning of the western boarder of settler Toronto. This line drawn on our maps buries the history of this location. In 1788, Crown surveyor, Alexander Aitken, employed military force to perform a survey of the river to mark the land encompassed in the Toronto purchase of 1787.

At the time of the survey, the location of the border was disputed by the Credit River Mississauga who've maintained, to this day, that the Toronto purchase only included lands up to the Humber River. This border is marked as well with the deceit and dishonesty used by the Crown in securing the Toronto purchase agreement. This place is also inscribed as a site of buried Indigenous resistance as Aitken was only able to survey three miles up the Etobicoke River, who has forced to abandon his survey by the Mississaugas.

We see this resistance embodied in the current map of Toronto, where the western border changes from its path along the river, extending in a straight line first to the east and then to the north.

Through the act of remembering this history, we rapture the settler constructed line between the past and present. By teaching the buried Indigenous histories of this place to our students, perhaps daily land recognitions in our schools won't become another way for settler colonial culture to claim present and future innocence.

We fill in the historical silences of this settler nation and recognize our complicity in the continued occupation on this stolen land from Kate Curtis, TDSB teacher.

Narrator: We would like to leave you with a glossary of the water sounds that we have used in this episode. The sounds we've gathered are from this place – Lake Ontario, Garrison Creek, the Etobicoke River, as well as the marked and unmarked places where water continues to flow and overflow.

Eve: The Henceforward, Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island.

[0:47:13] End of Audio