

The Humber is a Haunting: Settler Deathscapes, Indigenous Spectres, and the Memorialisation of a Canadian Heritage River

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Abstract: This paper argues that state-sponsored memorialisation is a critical enterprise in creating and maintaining a national cultural identity that softens or erases the ongoing process of death-making and dispossession wrought by settlers on the land and Indigenous peoples. Drawing on the work of Toronto-based Cree scholar Karyn Recollet, I further argue that this death-making is not a given. Indigenous peoples assert their presence and relationships to the Humber River and its adjacent lifeforces alongside and in opposition to official memorialising projects. The 20th anniversary of the Humber River's designation as a Canada Heritage River in 2019, the first in the era of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action, begs the question as to the role memorial and commemoration ceremonies play in the coalescence of a particular settler colonial story/myth that stabilises geographies as "memorial spaces" while simultaneously narrating Indigenous peoples through erasure, assimilation, and as historical ghosts.

Keywords: settler colonialism, memorial plaques, haunting, glyphing, Humber River, deathscapes

Introduction: The Humber is a Story

In the summer of 2018, my partner and I got our first puppy, a collie mix we named Humber. We chose the name because we live near Humber's namesake, the Humber River, and dreamed of having a pup companion to walk with us along the many trails near our house. When people in our neighbourhood learn our dog's name we are met with an exclamation that Humber is a *very* Toronto name. Indeed, the Humber River plays a central role in the settler mythology that constructs Toronto as a place. Walking along its bank you become aware of the centrality of this river to Toronto's "story". Memorial plaques line the basin at Lake Ontario and dot the map northward through Toronto's West End and up the broader watershed of the city's northern suburbs to its place of origin in the Holland Marshes south of Lake Simcoe. In a metropolis of nearly three million people, Toronto is a surprisingly forested city. This is partly the result of the dozens of rivers, creeks, and ravines that all flow down through the regional watershed into the vastness of Lake Ontario on the city's southern edge. Amidst the

concrete, the busy streets, and the throngs of neighbourhoods this interlocking eco-system contributes in important ways to human life. The Toronto area's four major rivers (Credit, Humber, Don, and Rouge) are dividing lines for the current geographic boundaries of the city and they are each given places of importance in the social life of local residents.

There is a cottage industry of books that engage (from a settler perspective) with the history of the Humber River, all building on the historical legacy of Kathleen M. Lizar's (1913) *The Valley of the Humber 1615–1913* and Percy J. Robinson's (1933) *Toronto during the French Régime 1615–1793* (Fletcher 2006; Robertson 2010; Turner 2015; Williamson 2008). This paper argues that state-sponsored memorialisation is a critical enterprise in creating and maintaining a national (and local) cultural identity that attempts to soften or erase the ongoing processes of death-making and dispossession wrought by settlers. While memorial plaques in public spaces may seem innocuous to struggles for decolonisation compared with the pressing issues of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, trans and Two-Spirit people,¹ or the Canadian state's armed response to Indigenous land defence, Couture et al. (2018) convincingly argue in their book *On This Patch of Grass* that local parks are particularly fertile places to talk about land in relationship to colonialism, erasure, and ongoing Indigenous relationships to urban space. This is true because the naming and commemoration of parks and rivers is one of the primary ways that the imaginaries of settlers are entrenched into everyday life (Barry and Agyeman 2020; Couture 2020; Rose-Redwood 2016).

An unsettling of this relationship must be focused on challenging the state and settler society's assertions of authority over land, since as Tuck and Yang (2012) point out, decolonisation is and has always been about land. In Toronto, a number of Indigenous-led projects (First Story, Ojibiikaan, Taiaiko'n Historical Preservation Society, and Ogimaa Mikana, among others) have worked to re-assert Indigenous places, names, relationships, and histories in the city's urban landscape (DaCosta 2014). Yet, markers still line the Humber River with narratives of white male "discovery". They might acknowledge Indigenous peoples' presence and history on these territories and (at least in more recent markers) invite them into the conversation, but always inevitably return to a story that stabilises Canadian national identity. This is critical given that such narratives directly impact contemporary beliefs and behaviours (Barker 2018; Freeman 2010a; Mackey 2002; Zettler 2020). These markers are a mundane but insipid form of taking control and ownership over environments by mapping land, naming places, and controlling the narrative of how things came to be, which is, as Goenpul Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015:59) notes, "an integral part of the colonising process". As such, it is important to study the productive work of memorialisation and commemoration to better understand their role in the creation and stabilisation of settler national mythologies.

Method, Location, Season

I conducted this research through archival work at the Toronto Public Library and the Ontario Archives including engagement with a number of primary and

secondary historical sources. I also spent a year-and-a-half undertaking ethnographic documentation of memorial plaques through research-collecting walks along the Humber River, as well as through observation and participation in the 2019 (re)construction of the Three Sisters Garden in Étienne Brûlé Park and virtual events organised by the Taiaiko'n Historical Preservation Society and the High Park Nature Centre in 2020.

I wish to situate my own authorial position in relation to this paper before proceeding, as failure to do so risks “perpetuating the idea that writing and knowledge is not produced by people who occupy specific temporal and sociocultural positions, positions often bound to or by colonialism” (de Leeuw and Hunt 2018:3). I am a genderqueer settler of mixed mostly European ancestry (French/Acadian, Polish, Spanish) who was born and grew up in the post-industrial city of Welland, Ontario to working class parents. I have lived in Toronto since 2003 and this is where I have worked, gone to graduate school, developed long-term community relationships, participated in social justice groups, and come into relationship with a number of Indigenous political and cultural initiatives, most intimately the Grassy Narrows River Run and the Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp. While I have longstanding acquaintances with some of the Indigenous people involved in projects along the Humber River, I am not an active contributor to these initiatives and cannot speak to their intentions, processes, and relationships. Instead, I have done my best to respectfully draw on some of the knowledge that they have publicly shared and on my own observations and experiences participating in their activities when I felt it was necessary for context, but I encourage readers to seek these sources out directly for a deeper discussion on their intentions and processes (Tremblay 2018). This research is my active attempt to unsettle my own relationship to the Humber River, recognising the insightful contributions of Dian Million (2009) that “we feel our histories as well as think them”, I do so in a way that seeks to deeply listen to and reflect upon the stories being told that disrupt the taken-for-granted historical narrative of the city I live in.

De Leeuw and Hunt (2018:10) suggest we must be attuned to the “necessity of geographical praxis that unsettles our own authority to theorise what decolonisation means in the places in which we live and work”. Taking heed of this wisdom, this research does not presume what decolonisation means. It focuses on the epistemological and ontological tensions that construct the Humber River as a *place* by flowing through four seasons (sections): autumn, winter, spring, and summer. The first section (Autumn) reflects upon the interrelationship between geography, water, fish, animals, and humans that created the place we call Toronto. It sets the foundation for analysing how settler invasion drastically disrupted these balances and appropriated Indigenous knowledges and land. The second section (Winter) draws on the work of Avery Gordon to investigate how settler colonialism and settler historiography are death-making enterprises that are always in the process of constructing and enacting Indigenous peoples on these territories as dead or dying. The third section (Spring) draws on the work of Karyn Recollet to explore how Indigenous peoples assert jurisdiction through apparitions, refusals, and a continued tending to the relationships along the Humber

River in the face of this death-making. The final section (Summer) investigates the possibilities for unsettling memory work.

Autumn: This Place is a Passage

This place is a passage. The Atlantic salmon travelled the waters of the Humber River likely before the receding of the Wisconsin glaciation 12,000 years ago (Dymond et al. 2019). Indigenous oral history (Devine and Laking 2018; Mills and Roque 2019; Williams 2018) and Western academic research (Coleman 1922; Dymond et al. 2019) suggest that the freshwater subspecies travelled in and out of the Great Lakes from the Champlain Sea and Atlantic Ocean since at least 10,000 to 17,000 years ago. During the autumn months, after a summer's growth feeding on cisco and other fish in Lake Ontario, the salmon travelled north up tributaries and streams to spawn (Dymond et al. 2019). The salmon migration encouraged other beings to travel along the river—deer, river otter, coyotes, and wild turkey all moved along the Humber's shores and cleared paths (Mills and Roque 2019). Soon human relatives took note of the importance of this passage. As Mills and Roque (2019) explain, "Indigenous peoples respected the wisdom of their animal cousins and those animal paths eventually became human-used portage trails to travel, to gather for negotiations and ceremony, as well as [for] ... trade and commerce". Animal migration trails along the Humber River became an important shared path for many Indigenous peoples.

The memorial plaques spread out along the river explain that the Wendat call the path *Háhattey*, the Onöndowa'ga (Seneca) call it *Dëdwata:së'*, the Nishnaabeg call it *Maada-oonidiwinan Miikaansan*, and settlers refer to it as the Toronto Carrying Place portage. This portage, 46 km in length from the eastern bank of the Humber River along the shore of Lake Ontario moving up the escarpment northward through the Humber subwatersheds to Lake Simcoe, became an important shortcut allowing travellers to navigate from Lake Ontario to Lake Couchiching and then the upper Great Lakes into the north west with greater ease (Humber Watershed Task Force 1997). This meant that travellers did not have to canoe through the rough waters of the Great Lakes and could instead take an inland route to save time and energy. Journals of early French colonisers noted that the Toronto Carrying Place possessed "a permanence very different from casual paths through the forest. It was as old as human life in America" (Robinson 1933:2). The Humber along with Toronto's other major rivers was attractive to early peoples in the area because of these rich salmon fisheries, its fertile soil, and its geographic importance as a passageway to the north west (Freeman 2010a; Williams 2018). Archaeological excavation sites provide further confirmation of Indigenous oral histories that the trail acted as a significant segment of the pan-American trade routes spanning from the tail to the head of Turtle Island (Tremblay 2018; Williamson 2008). For instance, Crawford et al. (2006) and Hart et al. (2003) trace the lineage of Northern Flint maize, the most commonly used corn by Haudenosaunee and Wendat communities upon European contact, to the Pueblo region at the current borderlands of northern New Mexico and Arizona. Carbon-dated kernels found along the Humber watershed suggest

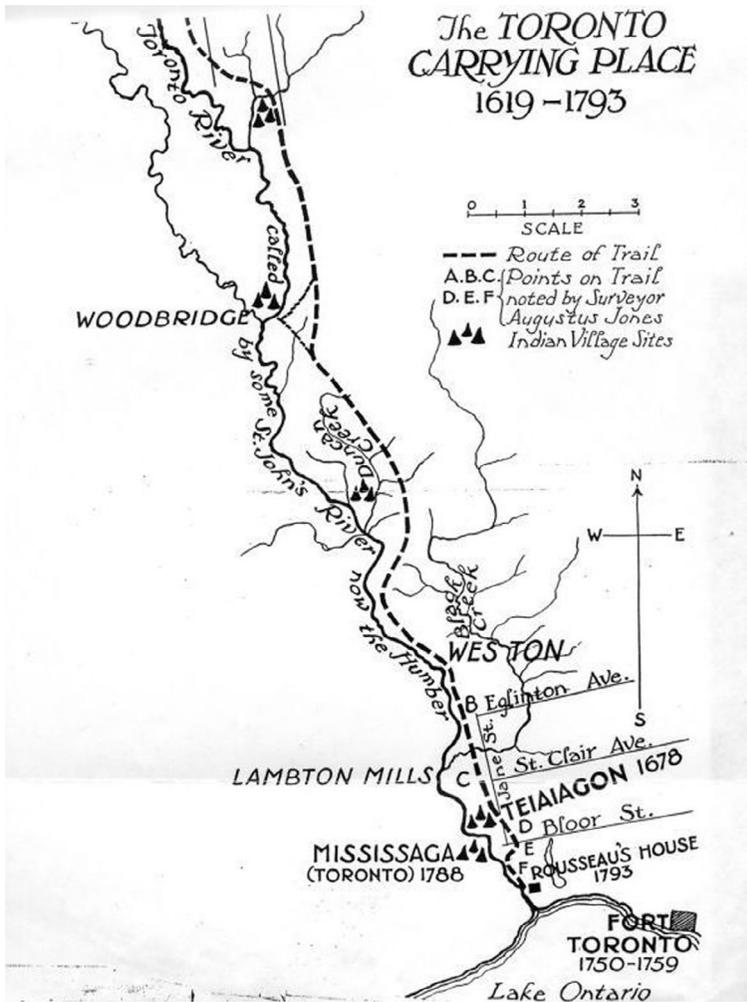


Figure 1: The Toronto Carrying Place trail (source: Robinson 1933)²

that Northern Flint maize was predominant at least 2,000-1,000 years ago and that the earliest dated corn specimen observed so far in the Great Lakes Region date to 500 AD affirming the lengthy history of travel along these routes.

Heather Howard and Rodney Bobiwash (2009:4), in the first edition of *First Nations House Magazine*, discuss the importance of these passages, noting:

The Great Lakes area, particularly around Toronto was a place not dissimilar to the Mediterranean in that many cultures and peoples met for the purposes of trade and commerce—dating back thousands of years prior to European contact. In this process, cultures melded and developed, groups intermarried, and languages and cultures flourished. Opportunities to simultaneously pursue horticulture and game hunting meant that the Native peoples of the area had the luxury of developing complex and sophisticated ceremonial lives; the long autumn season was (and is) an important

ceremonial time in the annual cycles of all the Aboriginal peoples who have lived in the region.

When I came across this article, I had to sit with the tension that Howard and Bobiwash were holding in relation to Toronto's origin story. Like others in this city, I was always told that the word "Toronto" meant "meeting place" and while this squared with their description above it did not align with interventions by language speakers who rejected this translation. The centrality of the carrying place route ultimately led settlers to affix the name "Toronto" to the site where the metropolis now sits. The etymology of Toronto continues to be a matter of dispute, though more recent Indigenous interventions have shed some clarity in that regard (DaCosta 2014; Devine and Laking 2018; Howard and Bobiwash 2009; Methot 2012; Mills and Roque 2019; Williams 2018; Woodworth 2006). The most common settler interpretation of the word's meaning, "the meeting place", can be traced to the publication of Henry Scadding's (1873) book *Toronto of Old*. In this book, Scadding references French maps and archival documents showing Lake Simcoe and the areas adjacent to the Carrying Place as marked "Taronto or Toronto". The idea that Toronto means "the meeting place" came from Scadding himself, who did not speak any of the Iroquoian languages, and who disregarded other interpretations (Freeman 2010a). The actual meaning of the word continues to be a matter of discussion. Nehiyaw iskwêw/ayahkwêw educator Suzanne Methot (2012) explains:

Speakers of various Iroquoian languages disagree on the most correct translation: some say Tkaronto refers to the reflection of the huge trees that grew on the edge of the lake...; some say Tkaronto refers to the wooden stakes that the Huron [Wendat] and then the Haudenosaunee drove into the water to create fish weirs, first near where Lake Simcoe empties into Lake Couchiching, and later at the mouth of both the Humber and Rouge rivers, near the Seneca villages on the Toronto Passage. In any case, both refer to a place where trees are in the water.

Despite these various explanations, Bobiwash (2009:4) contends that the seasonal gathering of fish from the weirs would have involved many people from many different nations and would have occasioned autumnal trade, ceremonies, and celebrations. For this reason, he affirms that the definition "meeting place" or "gathering place" has at least metaphorical significance of Toronto as a place "where many people come together to meet on positive terms". Perhaps taking advantage of this generosity of interpretation, settler society has clung to the narrative that Toronto has always been a peaceful meeting place, erasing the violence of the city's ongoing colonisation.

In settler states like Canada, the United States, and Australia, urban genesis stories are used to create the sense of a distinct break between a locale's "pre-history" and a "formative" period in which settlers actively construct modern metropolises (Dorries et al. 2019; Hugill 2016; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Toews 2018). In most urban genesis stories, the early moments of intercultural negotiation are "the last time that we encounter Indigenous peoples as significant players in the life of the city" (Hugill 2016:266). This aligns with stories about Toronto's

origins. Official memorials about Indigenous life following the period of initial European contact (1615–1787) and prior to the first permanent European settlement normalise “the belief that conquest, accumulation by dispossession, and genocidal actions are natural and inevitable” (Gahman 2016:319–320). The historical memory and presence of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Wendat and other Indigenous communities in the region are characterised as precarious, transient, and fleeting. Their deaths or dispossession are conveyed as an unfortunate result of civilisational progress and not the continued process of settler colonial world making. Victoria Freeman’s PhD dissertation (2010a) and journal article (2010b) of the same title, *Toronto Has No History!*, remains one of the few settler-authored historical works that breaks from this common narrative by critically examining the erasure of Indigenous peoples from the historical memory of Canada’s largest city and showing that the colonisation of the city was anything but a friendly or peaceful transition. The erasure of Indigenous presence and connection to Toronto is not an oversight. It does critical work to produce the mythology that the city was inherited by white settlers through a peaceful and natural “civilising” process. Adjusted over time, these creation stories underlie contemporary memorial signage along the Humber River and much of the interpretation of Toronto’s history.

Winter: The Humber is a Haunting

The Humber is a haunting. 2019 marked the 20th anniversary of the Humber River’s designation as a “heritage river” by the Canadian Heritage River System (Perks 2019). I attended activities planned for this anniversary, including a “paddle the Humber” event and an exhibit taking place at the old 19th century tavern-turned-museum, Lambton House. I was curious to learn if and how the narrative of the Humber might change following the release of the “Calls to Action” by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

The curators of the exhibit made significant efforts to engage with the Indigenous history of the Humber, nonetheless upon walking in the first thing you see is a replica of the 1805 Toronto Purchase—a document that sought to extinguish the claims of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg to this land and cover-up the fraudulent Toronto Purchase of 1787 (Freeman 2010b). Overall, the exhibit, like the markers described above, told the story of the Humber River through a developmentalist teleology that saw settler presence as “progress” and Indigenous dispossession as “decline/recession”. The story of Indigenous peoples in Toronto was, in other words, told as a ghost story. Similar to the work of Amber Dean (2010) in her study of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, I wanted to explore the way that settler narratives construct Indigenous peoples in Toronto as dead or dying—as hauntings.

As a central site in Toronto’s urban genesis narrative and a physical manifestation of death and dispossession wrought on the land and Indigenous peoples by settlers, the Humber River can be understood as a “settler deathscape” (Barker 2018). As Barker defines them, “settler deathscapes become prized [by settler society] as collections of dates, as proof of long-term tenure of the land”

(2018:1143). While Barker uses the concept of the deathscape to refer specifically to cemeteries and war memorials, I argue here that the designation of the Humber as a Canadian Heritage River constitutes a deathscape in its commemoration of the history of European settlement in Toronto. As Barker notes, these deathscapes seek to address a central question that haunts settler societies: “if this is your land, where are your stories?” (2018:1143). Barker’s use of the concept “deathscape” has parallels to the concept of “wastelanding” introduced by Traci Brynne Voyles (2015:9) as a “racial and spatial signifier that renders an environment and the bodies that inhabit it pollutable”. Whereas wastelanding describes the process by which settlers determine which spaces are open to extraction and pollution, deathscapes focuses more on the way settlers memorialise and tell the story of such processes. Further, Sherene Razack’s (2012) concept of “death worlds” sits in the in-between to describe the ways that these conditions of life confer upon Indigenous peoples the status of living dead (ghosts).

To understand the role of deathscapes in settler claims to place, I draw on Avery Gordon’s concept of haunting. In her seminal work *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon (2008:xvi) argues that haunting is “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with ... or when their oppressive nature is denied ...”. For Gordon, haunting is a seething presence that complicates or disturbs taken-for-granted realities. The lived realities of Indigenous peoples in the city of Toronto, their connection to the land, and their ongoing relationships with the Humber River outside of settler jurisdiction are often overlooked, erased, or actively destroyed in the process of constructing settler space. For Gordon (2008), what is missing or disappeared is precisely what provides empirical evidence that a haunting is taking place. I draw on Gordon’s work here to forefront the importance of deconstructing settler historical narratives in an effort to unsettle ghost stories and “not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place ...” (2008:22). Engaging with how settler society has wrought death in a multitude of ways under the guise of progress is critical to destabilising our jurisdictional authority over the history and conservation of the land and waterways, a critical element of unsettling.

The settler historiography that narrates the Humber River constructs and enacts Indigenous peoples in Toronto as dead or dying by claiming jurisdiction over *this place* and how *this place* is remembered, even when the markers are meant to be “inclusive” of Indigenous histories. In Lisa Karen Taylor’s work on critical heritage and the celebrations of Canada’s sesquicentennial (“Canada 150”), she explains that heritage designations and practices make particular claims to recognition, significance, legitimacy, and futurity. In a settler colonial context those claims are meant to both narrate an origin story that eradicates the sovereignties of Indigenous nations and project the futurity of settler society as an inevitability of this history. Taylor (2018) argues this happens by constructing a discursive “indigenisation” of settlers through cultural and state institutions of governance. To create the urban genesis story of the modern metropolis of Toronto, settler historians, conservation authorities, historical societies, and governments overlay a narrative

of progress on top of a palimpsest of “Indian ghost stories”. This historical narrative has two purposes: (1) to naturalise settlers by claiming lineage to the city’s Indigenous past; and (2) to absolve settlers of current complicity in dispossession by marking Indigenous peoples as either historical ghosts that distantly haunt the conscience of the city or present ghosts whose lived realities are understood as the unfortunate result of *colonialism elsewhere*—necessitating Indigenous peoples to come to Toronto and be incorporated at the margins of the multicultural mosaic.

The Naturalisation of the Settler

Settlers history is beguiling. As Philip J. Deloria explains in *Playing Indian* (1998), European settlers assert a sort of “betwixt-and-betweenness” to create an entirely new identity. This new identity—the normatively white American/Canadian—is considered both “native” and European and yet also neither. By appropriating and grafting their own rather short histories and lineages on these lands to the time immemorial relationships that Indigenous peoples have with Turtle Island, settlers naturalise their presence. This happens through a historicisation strategy that narrates settlers as a new hybrid society that emerged out of an “encounter” between European and Indigenous North American societies. And, as the story goes, in the process of America/Canada being birthed, Indigenous peoples, their societies, their jurisdictions, and their sovereignties died out, what Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker (2016) identify as the “All the Real Indians Died Off” myth. This story seeks to absolve settlers of the ongoing genocide that structures settler colonialism (Wolfe 2006) and elides the ongoing relationships, jurisdictions, sovereignties, and lived realities of Indigenous peoples on the territories that settlers now claim as their own (Whetung 2019). Tuck and Yang (2012:14) describe this process as “settler adoption fantasies ... those narratives in the settler colonial imagination in which the Native (understanding that he is becoming extinct) hands over his land, his claim to the land, his very Indian-ness to the settler for safe-keeping”. These adoption fantasies invest in a settler futurity dependent on the foreclosure of an Indigenous futurity.

I came across an example of this settler naturalisation myth when I found the marker titled “Discover the Humber River’s Ancient Past” situated at Sir Casimir Gzowski Park (Figure 2). The text reads:

In the late 1500s and early 1600s, fur-trading with newly arrived Europeans gave the Humber path even greater strategic significance. After 1649–1650, the Huron-Wendat lost this area to the Five Nations Iroquois, who built a well-defended village near today’s Bloor Street crossing. By 1700, the Mississaugas had replaced the Five Nations village with their own. French trading posts at the mouth of the Humber River followed, the first being built in 1720. While people of Aboriginal, European and Metis descent continued to use the trail, a new European settlement began with the British founding of the Town of York (now Toronto) in 1793, not far from the mouth of the Humber.

This marker is emblematic of the entire “Discovery Walk” series. It is easy to get swept up in this narrative, even if like me, you read the plaques sceptical of the

way this story is being told. Supposedly neutral and inclusive language works to naturalise settlers and absolve settler society of complicity in the death and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. It does so in a number of ways. It establishes Toronto's "ancient past" as being in the 1500s–1600s where it completely erases the thousands of years of historical relationships between Indigenous peoples and *this place*. It suggests the Humber River and Carrying Place Trail gain "greater strategic significance" through the appearance of Europeans. As a move to innocence, European presence is grafted into the historical memory of the river/trail and then highlighted as a key moment of great "strategic" importance with the reader left to assume what was strategic about it. The marker then suggests that the Huron-Wendat *lost* the area to the Five Nations Iroquois who *built* a "well-defended" village and further that the Mississaugas *replaced* the Five Nations with a village of their own. The reader is persuaded to believe that Indigenous nations had a tenuous grasp on these territories and that it was common for one nation to dispossess the other through military occupation.

In *Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg: This is Our Territory* (2018), Elder and historian Gidigaa Migizi (Doug Williams) disputes these historical accounts and presents a more nuanced understanding of the complex diplomatic relationship between the Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg before and after European occupation. He also disputes the legitimacy of the historical timeline



Figure 2: "Discover the Humber River's Ancient Past", Sir Casimir Gzowski Park (photo by author, 21 May 2019) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

presented in this marker (the dominant historical narrative today) noting: “The colonial historical record says that Mississauga people settled on the north shore of Lake Ontario in the mid-1700s. This is absolutely incorrect” (Williams 2018:39). Williams explains that the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg lived on the riverbed territories near Toronto for many years prior to European colonisation and negotiated a relationship where the Wendat would live within their territories in woodland/cultivation growing areas. The Nishnaabeg’s retreat from the area coincided with increasing violence and disease spread by colonisers.

Finally, the latter part of the marker’s text addresses European and Métis presence (which are conflated) noting that “a new European settlement” *began with the British founding of the Town of York*. In this final section, the Town of York (now Toronto) is presented as emerging passively within and then beyond the Indigenous communities who occupied this space. There is no active description of dispossession taking place and the plaque importantly elides the nefarious history of the Toronto Purchase (1787) which fraudulently (even by British standards) dispossessed the Mississaugas of their territories (Freeman 2010a). This narrative has the dual purpose of displacement (of Indigenous peoples) and emplacement (of settlers) that creates the illusion that the city has always been “Indigenous-friendly”. Displacement and emplacement are how the transfer of land is justified, what Barker describes as “the removal of Indigenous belonging on the land in every sense—essentially the destruction of Indigenous identity—and its replacement with settler belonging or claim, and ultimately settler ‘nativism’” (2018:1137). Through this transference, settlers also erase the history of death-making they have perpetuated.

Indigenous Peoples as Ghosts and the Absolution of the Settler

Settlers are death-makers. There is a romanticised story about the origins of Toronto that focuses on a French teenager, Étienne Brûlé, brought to North America by Samuel de Champlain and then immediately sent to live with the Wendat people, to learn their language, and to prepare for a role as an interpreter and scout. Brûlé is credited as being the first European to travel the Humber River and see Lake Ontario when he accompanied the Wendat back to their territories in the autumn of 1615 (Kidd 2015; Lizars 1913; Robinson 1933). Numerous studies suggest that Brûlé, who did not keep an account of his journey, may not have even travelled the Toronto Carrying Place trail on this particular journey nor other river valleys he is purportedly named as being the first European to have “discovered” (Kent 1976). No matter the exact route, Brûlé was not an explorer, he was a teenager in the care of the Wendat who had exchanged him with one of their own youth in a process of diplomacy with the French. The importance granted to Brûlé as a “discoverer” by historians and municipal officials for sitting in a canoe and travelling alongside a community returning to their home territories is expansive and overwhelming in the context of Toronto’s history. A typical narrative includes this account from Kathleen M. Lizars (1913:10): “Brulé stood on the beach at the mouth of the Humber, ‘the first civilized man to gaze out upon that broad expanse of waters’”. There are numerous memorial plaques dedicated to

Brûlé, streets named after him (including in my neighbourhood), and a vast park sits at the base of the former Onöndowa'ga (Seneca) village of Taiaiko'n along the Humber River that bears his name.

The story of Brûlé's death is important. It gives us a glimpse of how the Wendat, with whom he was embedded, came to be written into settler archives as savage and demonic people. In Champlain's journals, Brûlé was described as an unreliable interpreter, a noted traitor, a scoundrel, and someone who had gone "native" (Sulte 1908). The Haudenosaunee and Wendat also became wary of Brûlé's duplicity and when he eventually returned to live among them in 1636 he was condemned to death. A journal entry from a Jesuit missionary named Gabriel Sagard, while not a witness to the events of Brûlé's demise, became the taken-for-granted narrative of his death. The story told by Sagard is recorded as:

Brulé fut condamné à mort, puis manger par les Hurons auxquels il avait si longtemps servi de truchement, en tout pour une haine qu'ils conçurent contre lui pour je ne sais quel faute qu'il commit à leur endroit. Il y avait beaucoup d'années qu'il demeurait avec eux, vivant quasi comme eux, et servent de truchement aux Français et, après tout cela, n'a remporté pour toute... (Sulte 1908:126)

Brulé was condemned to death and eaten by the Hurons [Wendat] with whom he had been serving as an intermediary for a long time, I am unaware of what fault or harm he inflicted upon them in their territories. He had lived among them for many years, living quasi like them, and serving as an intermediary with the French, and all of this amounted to nothing. (Author's interpretation)

The notion that the Wendat murdered and ate Brûlé is unsubstantiated by any settler witnesses or accounts nor by Indigenous oral histories. It did, however, create the inference that the Wendat were the nefarious and savage death-makers in the urban genesis story, marking settlers as innocents. This myth continues to be told. An excerpt from Heather Robertson's (2010:9) *Walking into Wilderness: The Toronto Carrying Place and Nine Mile Portage*, for instance, notes "how could any child forget that Brûlé had been eaten". It is also reproduced in the news media, the final sentences of Kenneth Kidd's (2015) *Toronto Star* article, "Étienne Brûlé Groundbreaking Explorer and Wandering Scoundrel", suggests that Brûlé had no option but to return to live among the Wendat lest he be hanged for treason in France, but "for reasons now lost in the mist, the Huron [Wendat] eventually killed (and ate) him". The unsubstantiated cannibalism that appears in these narratives is used precisely to conjure notions of monstrosity amongst Indigenous peoples—justifying the outcomes of settlement.

While this is one example of how "Indian ghost stories" proliferate Toronto's mythos, many others persist as well. In Ron Fletcher's (2006) *The Humber: Tales of a Canadian Heritage River* he relays an account of W.M. Mansell, a wealthy white settler who lived at 80 Baby Point Road, up the Humber's escarpment and atop of what was once the village of Taiaiko'n, who uncovered axe heads in his backyard in 1924 and proudly displayed these "Indian artefacts" on his fireplace mantel. Mansell soon becomes haunted by nightmares of the "dark magic" of Indigenous savagery where conversations with an official at the Royal Ontario Museum had him believe these axe heads would have been used as molten hot

bracelets of torture placed around the necks of enemies of the Seneca. These axe heads tormented Mansell with the apparitions of native savagery, a savagery that is used to frame the emergence of the city of Toronto in Fletcher's book as a taming of wildness and a life-giving gift of civilisation. These stories of violence are used to position particular places as "frontiers" in need of "civilising", and thus the fear of Indigenous "monstrosity" establishes a "mobile space of exception" which simultaneously draws these places into the colonial imaginary while also targeting them for erasure/replacement (Rifkin 2017). Such imagery mollifies and inverts back upon Indigenous peoples the ongoing and persistent death-making settler society inflicted on the river, land, animals, and Indigenous peoples themselves.

Instead, we know that the Atlantic salmon suffered catastrophically upon European settlement. Evidenced by Dymond et al. (2019), settlers were the central cause of the extirpation of the Atlantic salmon in the Humber River after tens of thousands of years of swimming and spawning in this watershed, unencumbered by the fishing weirs that are speculated to have given Toronto its name. They explain that the "causes for decline and final extirpation of the Salmon may include the erection of numerous mill dams, excessive and ill-timed fishing, deforestation, pollution of streams, and sudden rise of Alewife *Alosa pseudoharengus* population in Lake Ontario" (Dymond et al. 2019:308). While settlers realised that mill dams blocked salmon from reaching their spawning grounds causing their decline, they were considered "wastelands" and these dams persisted and proliferated until the late 19th century when after only 100 years of settlement, the fish were extirpated from the river. Today, the historic mills that line the river are commemorated in a positive light, side-stepping their role in the death of the salmon. The Atlantic salmon was re-introduced into the Humber in 2011, yet Allen and Mandrak (2019:316) note that today settler culture produces similar patterns of biodiversity loss "with approximately 30% of Canadian freshwater fish at risk of extinction".

The death of the salmon and the pollution of the Humber River were partly the result of deforestation and no shift was felt as much as the loss of the Black Oak Savannah. Cultivated over millennia by Indigenous peoples through controlled burns, European settlement resulted in active fire suppression altering the composition and dynamics of the savannahs (Dinh et al. 2015). Today oak savannahs have "become one of North America's most threatened ecosystems, occupying only 0.02% of their historical range ... [with] less than three percent of presettlement savanna remain[ing] in southern Ontario" (Dinh et al. 2015:470). From the base of my street, you can still see remnants of the oak savannah if you look west across Grenadier Pond towards Toronto's High Park, though as the multiple conservation signs suggest they and much of this eco-system requires significant remediation in order to be preserved. It was intriguing, then, that a 2006 plaque from Heritage Toronto in the private-public parkette at the corner of Queensway and Ellis Avenue notes the suppression of Indigenous knowledge and controlled burns, but then insinuates only that this loss promoted more forested and developed areas (see Figure 3).

Settlers also wrought death on land animals, overhunting game (i.e. deer, bison, etc.) and animals desired for fur (i.e. beavers), resulting in significant decline of these species in southern Ontario which caused hardship for the Indigenous nations who relied on these animals for survival (Freeman 2010a). By the late 19th century the Humber River Valley was dirty, polluted, prone to severe flooding, and missing significant biodiversity. This death-making facilitated the dispossession of the Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg. As Gidigaa Migizi (Doug Williams) explains, as early as that first trip travelling with Brûlé, the Wendat were exposed to deadly European viruses, noting “the viruses were introduced into Aayadowaad [Wendat] country when they overwintered [in 1615]. Between 1620 and 1630, a large number of Aayadowaad died” (Williams 2018:40). The settler narrative that viruses were the main culprit for the significant number of deaths of Indigenous peoples is a way of neutralising the conditions that settlers inflicted on Indigenous peoples that made it challenging to deal with viral infections. As Freeman (2010b) shows in her research, these activities were purposeful and meant to cause death.

Spring: This Space is a Spectre

This space is a spectre. As I walked along the Humber River, where the path veers underneath the ten-lane Gardiner Expressway, near the waste treatment plant in



Figure 3: “Black Oak Savannah”, Queensway and Ellis Avenue (photo by author, 21 May 2019) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

South Humber Park, adjacent to Park Lawn Cemetery in the King's Mill Park, under the Old Mill subway station, and further along the edges of the river in Étienne Brûlé Park, I found apparitions of Indigenous placemaking. Through graffiti, built structures, tended gardens, and physical presence, Indigenous peoples in Toronto have continued their longstanding relationships with the Humber River. Some of this presence is institutionally recognised, but most exists outside of settler purview. As Tonawanda Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman (2012:104) explains, "whether space is reconstructed through traditional memory or through new relationships to landscapes, for many Native communities this activity is a move toward self-determination". Rather than memorials of death, these interventions are spectres of life; of the reclamation and resurgence of language, culture, tradition and of the responsibilities necessary to be in good relations with the river. These are not ghostly hauntings, like the stories that seek to erase and dispossess Indigenous peoples but are rather living and evolving forms of resistance and prefiguration. They are a resistance to settler normativity and a refusal of the naturalisation of official commemorative signage.

Drawing on the work of Toronto-based Cree scholar/artist/writer Karyn Recollet (2015), I utilise the concept of "urban glyphing" to understand how Indigenous communities assert their presence and jurisdiction in settler deathscapes. Urban glyphing, a concept Recollet extends from the encounter of old school Indigenous practices of petroglyphing and contemporary underground urban artistic and performative practices such as graffiti, flashmobs, and rounddances, is a spatial tagging of relationship, jurisdiction, and responsibility that exists within, against, and beyond the authority of settler society. Along the Humber this takes many forms: graffiti tags that assert Indigenous presence (Figure 4); defacing of official memorial signs (Figure 5); murals that speak to over 13,000 years of Indigenous history on these territories (Figure 6). Their presence is pervasive and yet often invisibilised by settlers who use the parks for recreation, travel, or gatherings. Multi-plexed forms of tagging challenge "the multiple layers of occupation and representational practices that produce Toronto as a site of capital accumulation, rather than as an Indigenous territorial homeland and sovereign space" (Recollet 2015:133). Spectres of Indigenous life are abundant along the Humber River and often sprout in "wastelands" (Voyles 2015). Nēhiyaw poet Erica Violet Lee (2016) suggests spaces that are considered wastelands are seen not only as "unworthy of defence but deserving of devastation ... [they] are places where no medicines grow, only plants called 'weeds'". For much of Toronto's history the riverbank of the Humber was considered a wasteland by settler society because its usefulness had already been consumed and a wake of death and toxicity was left in place. The Toronto Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) worked hard to rehabilitate the city's rivers following the devastation of Hurricane Hazel in 1954 (including the re-introduction of Atlantic salmon in 2011), but these spaces are still oriented around the use of settlers. Indigenous peoples, often acting autonomously from settler institutions, maintain a relationship with the Humber River through art, ceremony, tending to the plants and medicines, and teachings. These acts are not performed as spectacle for settler consumption, but as a form



Figure 4: “Nish”, Sir Casimir Gzowski Park (photo by author, 21 May 2019) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

of spectrality that refuses settlers’ “spatiotemporal imaginaries of the city” (Baloy 2016:212). This spectrality takes the form of apparition, refusal, and relationship.

Apparitions

Indigenous iconography and symbols are included among state-sanctioned memorial signage and art along the Humber River. For instance, when I walked under the famous arched Humber Bay Bridge at the site where the river flows into Lake Ontario, I found turtles, canoes, salmon and snakes sculpted onto the structure. However, upon doing further research, even these images were chosen by a settler design firm without consultation with any local Indigenous communities except artist and educator Ahmoo (Allan) Angeconebe from Lac Seul First Nation (which is over a thousand kilometres from Toronto). By absorbing Indigenous iconography into markers and public art, settlers claim an “official history” that gives permanence and longevity to the unstable condition of colonial occupation. Nonetheless, informal processes of naming, storytelling, and glyphing reside alongside these symbols including graffiti that appears and disappears adjacent to official city texts. During my field research I noted tags that asserted “Nish” (short form for Nishnaabeg/Anishinaabe) as well as a number of other glyphs that read “Idle No More”, “Land Back”, “Canada is Stolen Land”, and the Marie Kondoinspired “Colonialism Does Not Spark Joy”. Through Million’s felt theory approach to assessing history, I sensed that these were critical conversations happening outside of official purview. This graffiti affirms Indigenous presence and refuses the white settler imaginary that seeks to obfuscate the ongoing death borne of settler



Figure 5: “Étienne Brûlé—Fuck That”, South Humber Park (photo by author, 8 April 2020) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

colonial violence and its most recent incarnation as the politics of liberal recognition. As such they act as apparitions haunting the official narrative of Toronto’s history. In Nicholas Blomley’s (2004) *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property*, memorial signage is implicated in the process of displacement and emplacement, the act by which settlers seek to remove Indigenous peoples from space and absorb their stories and histories into their own narratives of belonging. The graffiti tags that appear along the banks of the Humber River could be interpreted as an assertion of jurisdiction by Indigenous peoples and (possibly) non-Indigenous supporters and an open contestation of this remaking.

Refusals

There are also moments of direct refusal that permeate engagement with settler memorials. The best example of these refusals is the ongoing graffiti tagging of a memorial titled “Discovery Point” dedicated to Étienne Brûlé and commissioned by the Etobicoke Historical Society in South Humber Park. I discovered this off-the-beaten path plaque on a dog walk with my neighbours Doug and Patty. This memorial sits on an elevated cliff north of a Toronto waste treatment plant. The stone marker (Figure 5) reads “From a nearby spot Lake Ontario was first seen by a white man Étienne Brulé—September 9 1615—To Brulé and all like adventurous spirits who laid the foundation of our nation this memorial is dedicated”. During the length of my field research, I observed this marker to be tagged numerous



Figure 6: Philip Cote's mural, "Resurge: First Timeline", painted below Old Mill Station (photo by author 14 July 2020) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

times. In one instance the word "white man" was crossed out using a rock or some other sharp substance; in another instance a black spray-painted penis was painted on top of the writing. Most recently, the marker includes the word "white man" circled in red with a tag that reads "fuck that". This tagging should not be dismissed as vandalism but rather understood as part of a wider movement resisting racist statues, memorials, and narratives (Deloria 2020). In this refusal, the anonymous taggers are performing an inversion of the passive spectacle normally associated with Indigenous presence in official memorial signage. Instead they are creating a provocative negation of the narrative inscribed on the stone marker. It is a public and open refusal of not only the normativisation of the story being told, but of the grotesqueness of the narrative itself. The taggers become active participants in the memorialisation process rather than passive performers in the spectacle of settler colonial history-making. These apparitions and refusals can be understood as Indigenous assertions of place, what Couture (2020), drawing on the work of Glen Coulthard (2014), terms "grounded practices" which we can contrast with settler colonial attempts at emplacement represented in the markers themselves.

Relationships

Perhaps no other activity exemplifies grounded practices as the construction and tending to the Three Sisters garden situated in Étienne Brûlé Park. Over

consecutive years, Two-Spirit youth and allies mentored by Joce Two Crows Tremblay, guided by the teachings of Elders (Blu Waters, Catherine Tamaro, and Donna Powless), have erected and tended to the garden through ceremony, resistance, and various healing and nature walks open to anyone who wishes to participate. For Tremblay (2018), these activities “collectively and collaboratively, through Indigenous governance, self-determination and non-pyramidal power structures [allow Indigenous peoples to] reclaim space”. This reclamation is evident in the growing visibility and expansion of activities centred around the Humber River, most recently livestreamed walking tours partnered with the High Park Nature Conservancy during the COVID-19 pandemic. These assertions of space can be and are often invisibilised by institutional forces. Following the brutal winter ice storms of 2018–2019, the area where the garden is located flooded and iced over. In the spring thaw, the physical frameworks that supported the garden were carted off by disinterested city workers clearing out debris. That summer, a dozen Two-Spirit folks gathered on the banks of the Humber River with another dozen non-Indigenous allies (including myself). Ceremony was held for five days to grieve the loss of the garden and then those present helped reconstruct the garden. As of writing, the garden remains, growing tall with corn, beans, and squash over the summer and laying in rest in the winter. Like the three sisters, the garden has opened up possibilities for new relationships between the river, Indigenous peoples, and those settlers willing to see the possibilities that the spectres of Indigenous futurities offer. Tremblay (2018), drawing on the knowledge of Zainab Amadahy, offers the following explanation for the importance of this work: “Our stories have been silenced, but not fully taken from us. When we practice our Ceremonies, especially on the Land directly, we can download with our Ancestors, our Blood Memory helping us to potentially channel our inherent Gifts, live in Right Relations and find our path in Bimaadiziwin”. Through apparition, refusal, and relationship a portal to a future not constrained by the deathscapes of settler colonial memory is opened.

Summer: This River is a Life Force

This paper has no conclusion. In an attempt to remain self-reflective as to my role and contributions to this unsettling type of research and to honour the cyclical framework I used, following the seasons as a guiding force for this writing, I have intentionally chosen to leave this piece open. In refusing a conclusion, I also want to respectfully engage with the numerous Indigenous and decolonising methodologies that urge us to break from western paradigms (Kovach 2009; Smith 2012). This paper instead, remains open to revision, open to critique, open to utilisation, open to it being or becoming obsolete or unhelpful. However, there are three main themes that emerge out of this work I feel warrant further discussion: (1) the case for toppling statues; (2) the need for returning land and acknowledging the ongoing stewardship and jurisdiction of Indigenous peoples; and (3) the incommensurabilities and challenges in creating decolonising futures.

Toppling Statues

At the time of writing the toppling of statues of racists and colonialists like that of slave-trader Edward Colston in the UK, James Cook in Australia, and dozens of confederate monuments in the US, have made international headlines, prompting a public debate. In Toronto, statues of John A. MacDonald and Egerton Ryerson were doused with pink paint by supporters of Black Lives Matter-Toronto (CBC News 2020). Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz describes this cathartic act of toppling as “unforgetting”. Drawing on the etymological roots of the word “truth” she suggests that the opposite of truth is not a “lie” but a “forgetting” and the action you take to tell the truth is unforgetting (in Dixon and Dunbar-Ortiz 2009). These collective acts of unforgetting are a resistance to the systemic erasure of memory through state classification practices, what Shotwell (2016:37) suggests is “a core piece of colonial practice”. We see fragments of this unforgetting in the apparitions of Indigenous tags along the Humber and the defacing of the Étienne Brûlé memorial in South Humber Park. These interventions break the feelings of acceptance and normalness settlers have about “living with a lie instead of an unforgetting” (Shotwell 2016:39). Rather than an erasure of history, the toppling of statues and the defacing of racist/colonialist memorials are an opening and a refusal of the erasure and ghost-making of settler deathscapes.

Returning Land / Acknowledging Jurisdiction

The Three Sisters Garden is also a form of unforgetting, centring the long historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Humber River. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014:9) explains, this form of remembering and learning comes from “an individual’s intimate relationship with the spiritual and physical elements of creation ... at the centre of a learning journey that is life-long”. This life-long learning can be witnessed in videos, walking tours, and writing done by Joce Two Crows Tremblay and others involved in bringing the garden to life. Feeding the plants, gathering medicines, singing to the trees and the water are all part of the process by which participants tend to the garden creating relationships and asserting jurisdiction over space. Multiple jurisdictions are simultaneously asserted along the river: various levels of governments assert jurisdiction over the waterways (including what to memorialise) and conservation authorities are granted jurisdiction over the ecological health of the river and parks. Drawing on the work of Anishinaabe legal scholar, John Borrows, we can understand these multiple and overlapping assertions of jurisdiction as both a continued settler colonial project and part of a longstanding resistance to occupation. As Borrows (2002:1) notes, “Canada is covered by a system of law and governance that largely obscures and ignores the presence of pre-existing Indigenous regimes”. However, as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2019) reminds us, the tending to these pre-existing Indigenous regimes of governance are not a form of “resistance” or “activism” but rather a form of living “as we have always done”. Through what Pasternak (2017) describes as an “ontology of care”, those who have constructed and tended to the Three Sisters Garden also exercise jurisdiction. The very existence of the garden at Étienne Brûlé Park places settler sovereignty into crisis—

and the City's demolition of the garden following the winter storm of 2018–2019 suggests this assertion of jurisdiction was itself refused or misrecognised by the municipality. This is partly because, as Pasternak (2017) notes, cities are not commonly understood as Indigenous space. Jurisdiction is contested through the removal of Indigenous spaces and/or people from places where they are deemed "undesirable", but also through the proliferation of memorialisation and commemoration that seeks to construct the narrative of the city as a settler space. The Three Sisters Garden and the multiple apparitions of artwork and glyphs along the Humber speak to another relationship and tradition that comes through the land and one that offers the possibilities of reciprocity with the river, the salmon, other animals, and the forests. As Martineau and Ritskes (2014:i) affirm, these fugitive apparitions of Indigenous art and ceremony "mark the space of a returned and enduring presence". Nonetheless, as we witnessed with the destruction of the garden in 2019 and the ritual "graffiti-removal" by city bureaucrats, this presence is, as Martineau and Ritskes remind us, "complicated by its fraught relationality to the persistence of settler colonialism, which always threatens to reappropriate, assimilate, subsume/consume and repress Indigenous voicings and visibility, their forms and aesthetics, within its hegemonic logic of domination" (ibid.). Such a tension begs the question whether Canada and settler-Canadians are truly capable of (or committed to) engaging in reconciliation and decolonisation *as practice* or whether our continued perpetuation of national myths is incommensurable with and, in fact, antagonistic towards such autonomous acts of Indigenous lifemaking?

Incommensurabilities and Futurities

Alexis Shotwell's *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (2016) engages with the song "Come on Forest Fire, Burn the Disco Down" by settler musician Rae Spoon to affirm that land and place are relations more than they are locations. In the song, Spoon sings:

Ask the colonial ghosts if they live in your bones
 Ask the colonial ghosts if they live in your bones
 Ask the colonial ghost what they took
 And they'll tell you that...
 You're dancing on it. You're dancing on it.

As Shotwell (2016:23) contends these are good questions to ask since "any understanding of our place in the world rests on understanding the historical processes" that have inventoried the "ghosts in our bones". In this paper, I am trying to reckon with these questions through an analysis of the settler-initiated memorialisation projects that construct the Humber River as a *place* precisely because they exist in the neighbourhood I call home. What I learned from this research is that the haunting of the river exists on multiple planes, but we must reject the all-too-readily accepted assumption that the colonial project is complete (A Simpson 2014).

Can there be a decolonising or reconciliation of public memorials?

Tuck and Yang (2012) offer an ethic of incommensurability as a guiding principle for unsettling space, something that they argue stands in contrast to the aims of reconciliation which motivate settler moves to innocence. Incommensurability means that our pursuit of unsettling does not have to impact the work of decolonising—that they may exist as separate planes of existence. As Snelgrove et al. (2014) reflect, actions that are incommensurable can still sustain compatibility through relationships bound by accountability and shared resistance to colonial relations of domination. These actions need to be grounded in actual practices and place-based relationships, exemplified by the Two-Spirit folks who have planted the Three Sisters Garden along the Humber and who have offered teachings based on their relationships with the river to all people willing to learn. It is through such processes that we will hopefully exorcise the demons that haunt settler deathscapes on these territories.

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Endnotes

¹ Drawing on the work of Qwo-Li Driskill (2010), the term *Two-Spirit* is used in this paper “as a way to communicate numerous tribal traditions and social categories of gender outside dominant European binaries”. Driskill situates the term through the writing of Anguksuar (Richard LaFortune) who explains that its origins are in the Northern Algonquin dialect and gained currency at the third annual spiritual gathering of gay and lesbian Native people that took place near Winnipeg in 1990 (LaFortune 1997). The term is, as Driskill emphasises, intentionally complex and while like other umbrella terms that risk erasing difference, it is meant to be “inclusive, ambiguous, and fluid” in its use across multiple Indigenous nations.

² Available online at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_Lower_Humber_River_and_the_Toronto_Carrying_Place_trail,_showing_Native_villages.jpg (last accessed 6 July 2021).

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