



Visiting and Narrating:
An Interspecific Tale of Melancholia

by

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Abstract

My research uses sustainable book design as an outlet for studying the destructive dialogue between humans and the earth in the Anthropocene epoch. I investigate the effects of the Anthropocene on my own mental health, particularly attuned to moments of enlightenment and depression that arise as a result of the realities of human-made climate change. Our impact on earth has consequences that are both physical (droughts, flooding, illnesses/pandemics, etc.), and mental (stress, anxiety, depression, etc.). Exploring the phenomenon of loss of language in the depressed mind, I examine what experiences would improve this condition. This search leads me to the comfort I find in reading books and through the practice of finding myself in the written word. The acknowledgement of written language in books as both destructive (historically and culturally in Indigenous communities) and healing (as a sanctuary for independent mental and emotional growth) is the point of interest in this research.

Books exist as a vessel for communication, capturing historical shifts in societal values. In this way they serve as a dynamic timeline. Books move through space and thought, reflecting and dictating moments past, and also imagining futures. They are physically still and contained but breathe through their connection to other literary works – fiction and nonfiction. This research will live similarly, communicating the present and future outcome of our time on earth as a result of our past; our actions, while fleeting, influence the reaction of the land. In my material explorations and compositions, I view the land as body and the body as text – relational vessels for interspecific communication.

Acknowledgements

This thesis work explores the various connections I develop and maintain with the land and life that surrounds me. It has nurtured my relationship with nature, which influences my body and my mind. These conscious connections become a central methodology throughout my creative process and research, guiding this work along sustainable routes for more sustainable futures. I would therefore like to acknowledge the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe, and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original owners and custodians of the land on which I stand and create.

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Introduction

Books have always been a safe space for me. Ever since I could read, I learned that these infinite towers of words could house an escape from my negligent upbringing. It was the power of narratives that raised me – teaching me right from wrong, the impact of emotions, and how to be independent. In *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know*, Kathleen E. Absolon states that “...memory comes before motive” (76). Our experiences influence our paths, and the reactions we have to knowledge and affect stay with us as landmarks in memory. I can better remember small milestones of my life based on what book I was reading at the time; no matter the story, I grasped onto the comfort of never feeling alone through these moments. The house I grew up in was a toxic cloud of anger and violence that became increasingly difficult to breathe in as I got older. I craved stability and reliability in my adolescence and was never let down by the precious, fantastical adventures that were carefully perched on my beloved bookshelf. What marked freedom for me was acceptance into an out-of-province undergraduate program. I took refuge there and clung to the introduction of sustainable, thinking-through-making design practices. This opened my eyes to an entire world of possibility and challenges surrounding design, and it impacted my creative process immensely. It was during this time that I was introduced to the intricacies of book design. The two years I spent there ingrained a whole new set of ethics into my thinking, and from that point on I have been actively looking for new ways to introduce sustainable methods and materials into my practice.

The depression that continues to haunt me was once a part of my life that I considered to be separate or other. It was a secret that pushed people away, so I pushed it away in return. But my mind was still hanging by a thread. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic split the fibres even more. My existential struggles and depressive episodes became more prominent during this epidemic, which exists

largely due to human ignorance and disrespect for the land and all living things. What is the point of life if we keep killing it? Why do we get to make these choices? And how much longer do I have to endure it? I was desperate for connection to life again, and so my partner and I made the decision in May 2020 to move from our tiny downtown apartment to a bigger space in The Beaches with a backyard. We had barely unpacked before I invited my mother over to teach me the basics of (socially distanced) gardening, and I relished in the smell and feel of the dirt and plants. It was all the reason I needed to get up every morning; I would go outside, feel the grass under my feet, and turn the water on to nourish the new life I was growing. I began to believe that I could repurpose and revitalize myself with the same nourishment I provide to flora, and that books continue to provide to me. Books gifted me the passion and appreciation I have for expressive creativity. Books gave me life, and I am eager to reciprocate.

Research Questions

With this research, I had set out to deconstruct the components of the book and redefine the traditional structure of narratives that they enforce. I also explored how books have functioned as a healing space for me, when they have also historically participated in mastery over Indigenous communities. Books document stories that implement dominance over those with access to the knowledge they contain. For example, elementary and secondary level history textbooks gloss over the extent of harmful colonizing methods that occurred throughout the “discovery” and formation of Canada. Books educate future generations of the successes and downfalls of the past from a manipulative perspective; we write what we want the world to know and strive to forget the rest. Today, reading is a silent and independent

activity, whereas traditionally it was oral and social. According to Elspeth Jajdelska, this mainstream shift that occurred in the late seventeenth to eighteenth century was a condition of the restructured application of punctuation (3). Sentences that once needed to be read aloud to understand their structures and pauses could now be read silently for personal consumption. Humans limited the accessibility of storytelling by implementing independent structures that require a specific skill set – reading. While Indigenous communities in Canada transferred knowledge orally and through written methods such as petroglyphs, tattoos, and birch bark scrolls, Western written text marginalized these methods of cultural knowledge sharing. Independent reading isolates us from a natural interaction with our more-than-human world. We open the door that invites us away from our surroundings, and get lost in a new landscape. Much like the contemporary circumstances of succumbing to on-screen entertainment, books can be used as an escape from reality. My decolonizing interpretation of the book involves a non-linear practice of reading that encourages a dynamic, interspecific dialogue. My piece entwines with its habitat and persuades the reader to develop their own impression of the story, translating a language that is not provided through text. The act of narration here is a collaboration between two subjects, book and reader – in which the latter may be any life form.

I am inspired by the claims Julietta Singh makes in her book, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Singh states that:

...the act of reading is vital to [the] process of imagining otherwise and dwelling elsewhere, to the relentless exercise of unearthing and envisioning new human forms and conceptualizations of agency. Reading becomes not a humanizing process that rehearses the largely anthropocentric discourses of colonization but a much more radical process of opening us to the possibility of becoming ourselves promisingly dehumanized. (3)

While it is crucial to acknowledge the role of books as a colonial pawn, Singh offers

an alternative reality of reimagining the function of books. Books can be reclaimed as methods of storytelling, activating new knowledges and extending invitations to new homes. They can be the flowers that grow out of decay.

The impacts of the Anthropocene are present now more than ever as we struggle to find balance in the natural performances of the earth. My practice is dedicated to reimagining interspecific relationships. Books validate and encourage language as stimulation of imagination and reinforcement of knowledge – but the language of books should not depend on the written word. Instead, I acknowledge Singh’s welcoming practice of reading to envision new human agencies. My work draws from fantasy and imagination to animate our connection with the world.

My research is motivated by the following questions: How can sustainable book design be used to create a dynamic narrative about the mental health consequences of the Anthropocene? How can we create a stronger relationship with ourselves and the land by understanding the full extent of our harmful yet normalized actions that have negative environmental impacts? How can I breathe life into books the same way they nurtured me? And in what ways can I implement the knowledge and practice of mental growth onto book design? These research questions are important because they address issues that coincide with humanity’s influence and mastery over the land. They reach into history and offer a glimpse of why the world exists as it does today.

While books are often treated as lifeless objects, my research directions assume that they commute life and energy. They encourage a deeper acknowledgement of the way that mundane, everyday “things” contribute to our individual evolution. Jane Bennett offers an analysis and comparison of humans and “things”, which describes a more balanced relationship among the matter that make up the two. In reference to the story she tells of matter and agency in *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett disregards any notion of superiority in the

composition of our species:

The story will highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other. One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world. The hope is that the story will enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us, will generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology. (4)

Bennett's story is inspirational to my own in her treatment of overlapping matter. Not only is all matter on equal ground, but we are each interconnected because of this. Matter and energy are neither created nor destroyed; they are in constant movement and reproduction. There is an infinite train of circumstance and accountability – every instance of mass is a reaction to and for the events that precede and succeed their existence. This perspective of equal consideration among all human and non-human entities, with understanding of the reactions that would stem from it, is the positive force that encourages my sustainable initiatives. A more respectful and caring treatment of the natural forces that enable our existential wellbeing on the planet will ensure a reciprocal extension of the same energy in the future.

The processes and methods involved in answering these questions require a conversation between myself and an element of the land. This dialogue positively impacts my mental health. Throughout the creative process, I monitor the similarities in care and healing between myself and the land. For the purposes of this research, I have developed a reciprocal relationship of care and respect with a tree that I encounter on daily restorative walks along the creek by my home. The atmosphere is soothing and I feel comforted by the similarities I find between the physical characteristics of the tree, and the way I envision my wounded self. I strive to return this comfort by being a constant source of support for this life form. I visit with it

regularly and engage in conversation through touch.

Trees are energetic beings that live, breathe, and communicate in much the same way that humans do. They crave social interaction with their neighbours, and implement strategies of self defence in a crisis. Peter Wohlleben, author of *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate – Discoveries from a Secret World*, describes the deep-rooted knowledge that trees contain. Trees maintain an inner balance for their individual, as well as community-based, well being. Not only do they rely on their own species for survival and growth, but other flora, fauna, and even fungi to help maintain the ecosystems they create (Wohlleben 10). Trees are capable of recognizing which species are harmful and beneficial to them; they send and receive signals from surrounding life that let them know, for example, when to bare fruit to nourish wildlife, or when to excrete toxins to evade harmful intruders (Wohlleben 9). It would not be detrimental for humans to mimic the ways in which these beings automatically work in conjunction with all their surrounding elements to support their own development within a broader ecosystem. I hope to use this as a paradigm for a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge between humans and nature – particularly with the tree that hosts my piece.

The knowledge I seek from this ecosystem influences my own mental growth and healing. When comparing the similarities between humans and trees, the way we function and the things we crave are nearly identical. The network of currents that sends messages from a tree's roots to its limbs is similar to the way the human brain functions, stimulating its senses in ways that are familiar to us: through scent (Wohlleben 6). The messages our bodies receive through our senses allow us to determine what we like and dislike, or what is good for us and bad for us. This connection encourages further comparison between humans and trees. Scientist and conservationist, Tim Flannery, claims that, "A tree's most important means of staying connected to other trees is a 'wood wide web' of soil fungi that connects vegetation

in an intimate network... It takes a forest to create a microclimate suitable for tree growth and sustenance. So it's not surprising that isolated trees have far shorter lives than those living connected together in forests" (Flannery viii). This illustrates how external factors influence our development. Trees initiate protection through organic knowledge systems: there is a flow of communication and support between their roots and their leaves. When one tree is in danger of harmful animals and insects, the surrounding trees know what is coming and how to prepare themselves (Wohlleben 6).

Detachment is unhealthy; we need community among all modes of life to flourish. I create a sanctuary in this damaged being that has become my research companion through daily visits and in the piece I construct. In doing so, I reflect on what it means to create a safe space in my mind. If I can repurpose this injured, natural being as it continues supporting the ecosystem it belongs to, can I do the same for myself? By working *with* the community and the land we borrow, perhaps everyone facing mental health challenges can consider how the pathways of depression that haunt us might turn into new pathways that heal us. From a more widespread angle, we as a species can become more informed of how our surroundings influence us.

Theoretical Frameworks

Julia Kristeva, Mark Fisher, Donna J. Haraway, and Robin W. Kimmerer provide thoughtful observations about how the self exists in relation to its surroundings. Their writings have been key to the development of my work. My research is informed by the reciprocal relationship that exists between body, mind, and the land that I live on and borrow from. My exploration of depression and melancholia is driven by fluxes of emotion and mental health that I have experienced in relation to the Anthropocene. Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* provides an in-depth

observation of the internal impact of depression and melancholia on the human body and mind. Though the text is several decades old and does not consider the impacts of the Anthropocene, its description remains relevant to my own experiences of depression and an element of this phenomenon that has impacted my daily life most: loss of language. In *Ghosts Of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* by Mark Fisher, nostalgia and melancholy are further expressed through the essence of hauntology: "...what once was, what could have been, and – most keenly – what could still happen" (98). My piece humbly acknowledges my melancholic state through its corporeality; just as hauntology reflects on emotions and aesthetics from a moment in the past, I allow my depression to exist in space and time without directional expectations of healing or regression. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* by Donna J. Haraway offers a new term and definition for the earth's current geological age, which is more inclusive of a mindful relationship between humans and the land – *Chthulucene*. Haraway describes the Chthulucene as a "timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (Haraway 2). Where the Anthropocene would be considered the Fall or Winter of our time on earth, the Chthulucene would be the Spring of regeneration and transformation. Haraway encourages us to make kin in the Chthulucene to overcome the Anthropocene (4-5). My research and practice are influenced and guided by Indigenous philosophies, specifically as they are presented by Robin W. Kimmerer – an Indigenous scholar. Her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, awakens ecological consciousness and yearns for a mutual acknowledgement and respect between all living beings and things. This is significant to my attempts to decolonize the book, which are implemented by including organics in the piece, making kin with all the elements of the setting, and bringing life and fluid energy to the book.

Materials, Waste, and Sustainability

Material usage is a significant consideration within my practice. I challenge myself to implement sustainable initiatives, including using materials that are found, recycled, naturally sourced, etc. Additionally, I monitor waste production throughout the creation process to assist in future decision-making for methods that are least wasteful. Throughout this research, I am using leftover paper from past book design pieces that would otherwise serve no purpose. Some of this paper was obtained many years ago, some of it I had handmade out of dried eucalyptus leaves and pine needles from a season-past Christmas tree, and a portion of it has been eco-printed on with flora donated from my garden last summer. The use of these materials greatly reduces the accumulation of waste; the unused paper has been given a new function, and I am not unnecessarily purchasing and manipulating other resources that add to the consumptive tendencies of the general public. These materials are significant to my claim that books are vessels for communication – that they capture shifts in values and serve as a dynamic timeline. Fragments of these papers intertwine each other like fibres of my past, which have developed into the narrative of my present.

The materials I used successfully enabled minimal waste accumulation throughout the creation process. For example, I employed sheets of paper that had gone unused for up to three years. My commitment to sustainability is illuminated by an “attentiveness to matter and its powers” which Bennett indicates “will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of [being] inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself” (13). This emphasizes the importance of regarding the things around us with the same value we do ourselves: as agential contributors to our lives. The materiality of my book – the secondhand

paper, natural fibred stitching, and organic surroundings – hold as much significance to the meaning of the piece as its context.

These materials all work together with an element of the land that I visit regularly to create a space of transformation and communication, without relying on the isolating symbolic system of written language. The tree and surrounding elements that host the narrative of my piece are active participants in its composition. The body of the tree contains the contents of the book, acting as covers that represent infinite possibilities for a beginning and end in the way the branches stretch upwards. The swaying movement brought by the friendly wind, the gentle and playful laugh of the stream's trickling water, and the hearty scent of earth and mud are all soothing atmospherical components that humbly welcome my presence and story, and embrace the ecological function of the tree.

Research and Creation

Home Made

Finding the site for my installation was accidental. My intentions for this piece at the start of my research suggested a different setting – tree roots that were exposed by the water that flows down the slope of the ravine it is situated in (see fig. 1). I often took restorative walks to this site. One day, after deeper exploration of the trail that runs through this small ecosystem, I came across a tree that was split down the middle, almost all the way through (see fig. 2). By the time I became aware of its presence, the air had grown colder and the leaves had all fallen and decayed, leaving me unaware of whether or not this tree was alive. Though it sprouts from an uncomfortably steep terrain, made more challenging to interact with because of the cold and wet winter weather turning the ground into ice and mud, I felt a connection to the way the structure seemed to be pulling apart. The way it is severed more dramatically at the top and how this fracture travels to its core is a close representation of how I view my figurative being from head to toe. Likely damaged by



Fig. 1. Exposed roots



Fig. 2. Split tree

external factors, I wonder if it continues to split itself up as time passes. Can the tree support itself as effectively as it once had? Does it still function within or support the ecosystem of this ravine? I began to draw more and more connections between the tree, its well-being and its function, and myself, my own well-being and function.

Developing a relationship with this tree included a wonderful exchange of energy. Where communicating verbally seems like the obvious choice of sharing thoughts, vibrations, and intentions, I find my connection to touch is more meaningful to me than speaking aloud. This recounts my spurned relationship with linguistic communication. There are so many intensities that cannot be expressed through words; touch offers a different kind of comfort and healing. I am mindful of how I am not only implementing touch, but receiving it as well. In *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa emphasizes the significance of touch in grounding emotional connections: "...much like care, touch is called upon not as dominant, but as a *neglected* mode of relating with compelling potential to restore a gap that keeps knowledge from embracing a fully embodied subjectivity" (98). Throughout my developing relationship with the site of my piece, I reclaim touch as a reciprocal method of caring. Through this sense, I find a deeper understanding in alternative systems of language and knowledge sharing. My piece is part of a broader work, which is a daily practice of visiting and ritual.

Puig de la Bellacasa goes on to state that, "Touch exhibits as much ascendancy as it exposes vulnerability" (99). There is a give-and-take dynamic of superiority and exposure through the act of touch. The mindful space I help to create while developing my relationship with the site and creating my book installation is one of mutual respect for our vulnerabilities. This work teaches me how to express a humble appreciation for the land, and I am still learning that this requires attention to detail. I constantly remind myself that the earth is not a resource, but a gift. I can provide care to these gifts through the influence of my touch, and in return they will nourish me.

My piece, *Home Made*, involves a collection of paper chains, which are composed of a variety of leftover materials from past book designs. Some sheets are bright and colourful, some are empty and transparent. A few are thick and carry the faint scent of pine and eucalyptus, while others are thin, delicate, and give the impression of being nearly lifeless. Each sheet comes from my reserve of excess resources, a large portion of which have already been cut into. These leaves of paper were sliced into one-inch and half-inch strips and folded into chains of various lengths in a pattern I called “caterpillars” when I was a child because of the fluid way they expand and contract (see fig. 3-5). A small portion of these caterpillars were composed out of the same material, but most of them are a collage of pieces that contrast each other and create a gradient in colour and texture, symbolizing the duality and slow progression or regression of the depressed mind. I think of them as pieces of me at different key moments of my life.

My alternating interests and internal struggles have been expressed through book designs in the past: I shine light on my love of crisp Autumn weather, vibrant colours, and the mental impact of transitional periods of life in my star book, *To Fall* (see fig. 6), which features the poem, “Besides the Autumn poets sing” by Emily Dickinson. Fragments of each stanza are printed on various leaf cutouts that hang from the pages by string, and a desolate twig acts as the hinge that holds the book



Fig. 3. Caterpillar sample



Fig. 4. Caterpillar sample



Fig. 5. Caterpillar sample

together. An untitled piece (see fig. 7) explores the deconstruction of elements of the book to express the verbal obstacles I face with my culture's language. Being unable to communicate effectively with my extended family because of minimal exposure to (an outdated dialect of) the Croatian language endorsed this exploration. I focused on the materiality of the pages and the way frustration and confusion can be expressed through this vessel of communication without using words. *by a thread* (see fig. 8) is a physical depiction of the waves of my melancholia, with sheets of paper displaying prints of various flora taken from the salvation that is my backyard. These sheets, which had been burned through in the eco-printing process, hang by a thread at various lengths off a curved branch. As a whole, the elements of each piece create a narrative of my experiences with depression.

The caterpillar chains that combine each of these landmarks were carefully twisted and formed into flower clusters (see fig. 9-10), with stitches holding the shapes in place and binding them to other clusters. The stitching and binding process of book design is one that resonates strongly with me; it ties pieces of the story together that are meant to unify a narrative. However, not every component of this story is bound – some clusters remain unattached to others, and some chains are not even formed into flowers. This is done intentionally to illustrate the interrupted rhythm and lack of connection to language in my mind. Externally, the sculpture does not appear to be a collection of vastly disconnected pieces. The careful placement of fragments are akin to the masks we as individuals display to others, though some



Fig. 6. *To Fall* (2018)



Fig. 7. *Untitled* (2020)



Fig. 8. *by a thread* (2020)

chains are left more vulnerable as they dangle alongside the tree, spilling from its contents.

Once I completed these flower clusters, I was faced with the challenge of how to place them within the book covers without harming or vandalizing the tree in any way. I found that the anatomy of the tree was incredibly generous and inviting here, with the grooves and various nooks of the aged bark snugly supporting the folds of the paper. No additional material was required to tuck in and secure my narrative within its home. The final composition of *Home Made* (see fig. 11-18) is an arrangement of delicate flower clusters and even more vulnerable caterpillar strands bursting from, and spilling out of, this tree. The tree, which has been split down the middle from unknown causes, houses the contents of my narrative within its damaged trunk. It functions as the book covers that encourage the progression of my narrative in the same way its very nature implements constant growth upwards.



Fig. 9. Flower cluster



Fig. 10. Flower cluster



Fig. 11. *Home Made*



Fig. 12. *Home Made*



Fig. 13. *Home Made*



Fig. 14. *Home Made*



Fig. 15. *Home Made*



Fig. 16. *Home Made*



Fig. 17. *Home Made*



Fig. 18. *Home Made*

Loss of Language

Language dies in the minds and mouths of the depressed. This dying is a gradual affair that severs relationships and interactions with family, friends, and peers. Kristeva describes the speech of the depressed as repetitive, monotonous, interrupted, exhausted, broken, and obsessive, with the pressure of silence (33). From personal experience, this pressure feels like an empty void that suffocates logical thought processes. Asymbolia, or loss of language, is like the nightmare of trying to run as fast as you can from a monster, but your limbs feel like they are wading through tar; you know what to do and how you *should* function, though nothing proactive is happening. In this sense, loss of language is a deprivation of gesture and mind-body connection; it is a paralytic condition associated with depression that has had the greatest impact on me.

While this malaise feels utterly encompassing on the inside, it often does not reveal itself so severely to observers. Kristeva describes the mental and oral expression of speech patterns for a person living with depression. Internally, the rhythm that should exist to encourage the flow of verbal and physical communication is broken, and so these methods of communication have no output. "The arbitrary sequence perceived by depressive persons as absurd is coextensive with a loss of reference. The depressed speak of nothing, they have nothing to speak of: glued to the Thing (*Res*), they are without objects. That total and unsignifiable Thing is insignificant – it is a mere Nothing, their Nothing, Death" (Kristeva, 51). The Thing, in this context, is an intangible loss that restrains the depressed from maintaining or creating relationships and connections. This pain is unrepresentable because of the nature of the emotional and affective bond between the bereft and the lost. So aggressively is meaning and emotion protected in the mindset of the melancholic that a new connotation is created for the vastness of the Nothing that appears on the surface. This further encourages a physical and mental retreat from the world.

Kristeva explains that this disembodied loss is a replication of the pain of separation from the mother. When the depressed individual is experiencing symptoms such as loss of language, it is as a result of a *denial of negation* of the mother. This concept is primarily a Western condition of individuality that requires matricide. *Denial* is the “rejection of the signifier as well as semiotic representatives of drives and affects”, while *negation* is “the intellectual process that leads the repressed to representation on the condition of denying it and...shares in the signifier’s advent” (44). Negation is pivotal to identity formation. The primary negation is of the mother, transitioning from the use of gesture and unfiltered emotion to the association of signs. To deny the negation of the mother is to reject symbolic language, because language is a symptom of negating the mother. Language becomes a substitute for the ties that used to bind me to the mother. With language, I can express myself in alternative and more complex forms of communication that do not rely on mimesis or gesture, which were our primary methods of relation. Loss of language in the depressed is a rejection of the world, and a regression to this pre-linguistic point in time that embodies the safety and comfort experienced with the mother.

The treatment of language as a sign system involves the ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’, or the oral/written identification of a sign and its idea expressed by the sign, respectively. With loss of language, it appears as though the pathways in the brain that link those two inevitable components of a sign has been damaged, and this negatively impacts the linguistic functions of a person with depression by hindering their ability to make speech connections. The depressed mind clings more firmly onto loss and melancholia rather than personal, intimate connections, and their insipid speech patterns are a reflection of this. The intense identification with sadness prohibits a verbal expression of feelings, thereby establishing an inability to participate in the act of mourning. This act is what would be liberating from the Thing, and prompt reconnection with others. The distinct separation from the mother

experienced through loss of language is akin to our grief for the separation we experience from Mother Earth in this age of technology. Haraway's "Chthulucene" offers a space of acknowledgement for learning how to mourn the emotional connection with the earth that was broken through the Anthropocene.

My experience with loss of language reflects this sense of detachment from other entities and my own emotions. When the depressed person inherently believes that their own life and ego hold no meaning or significance, they unwillingly and inevitably apply that philosophy to all aspects of their being. The purpose and sincerity of their existence is immaterial. There is a general understanding that most people with depression not only experience personal neglect, but also feel neglected by others. By extension it is not only that they do not believe their words have value, but that others do not believe their words have value. The less we speak, the more others are encouraged to fill the void with things that hold "meaning", and the more we feel abandoned. It is therefore important to acknowledge and encourage other forms of expression and communication that do not so acutely isolate depressed peoples and communities. These other forms of expression include the development of alternative, more inclusive methods of communication through art and gesture.

Written language isolates communication – human or otherwise. As indicated in the Introduction, reading was – historically – a collective and oral practice. Because literacy was not prevalent for much of the history of written languages, the skill was considered a privilege. This resulted in a loss of access to knowledge and therefore power for the majority of people. Meanwhile storytelling remained a practice available to all, through any preferred method of interaction; Bruno Latour identifies storytelling as, "...not just a property of human language, but one of the many consequences of being thrown in a world that is, by itself, fully articulated and active" (13). This not only highlights that the earth is self-sufficient (and was, long before our arrival), but also that humans brought storytelling into the structure of life as a method

of understanding and relating to our world.

There are important elements of communication that cannot be spread through words, such as gesture. Jajdelska describes the differences between reading aloud and silently, and how that influences the reading space.

Reading aloud makes the reader's body the point of orientation for any spatial or temporal references in the text. In silent reading, these spatial and temporal references must be realized in the reader's imagination, in more abstract ways. Moreover, reading aloud creates a discourse structure with more than one participant, including some who might potentially interrupt or otherwise take part. Reading silently reduces these participants to an absent writer, unable to interact with the reader, and a reader who must adopt the role of an assumed reader in order to make sense of the text. (3)

Modern day's silent, independent reading and writing acts as a technology of withdrawal and detachment from the world. This is harmful because it endorses the division between us and the environment in a way that features it as a resource available for capitalization. Kristeva argues that symbolic language and affect become disconnected with the severity of depression, though they may be reasserted through poetic expressions. Affect can be conveyed through non-linguistic forms of communication that do not rely on a severed symbolic system. A method of reclamation can be considered here: touch as healing is a reclamation of the self and my ability to make connections. By expressing this method of connection into my writing, I am reuniting the symbolic and the embodied. Gesture supplements language because the depressed person refuses language. There is a need to connect gesture, embodied experience, and symbolic communication. This perspective of depression can open up new frameworks of healing.

In much the same way that written language is isolating, the English language specifically is restrictive and manipulative. English has shaped the dominant mode

of being, enforcing colonialism. The very structure of the language is predominant; the arrangement of sentences requires a relationship between subject and object to be considered complete. This emphasizes possessive expressions and prioritizes the individual over communities. Colonial and capitalist ideals are reflected here, imparting those values through symbolic usage. We place significance and power through ownership, which is portrayed in “correct” sentence formations that require a statement to belong to something or someone. This, coupled with the more apparent erasure of contending languages in Western society, helps shape the cycle between depression and communication. Indigenous people and immigrants spanning the planet end up being forced into adapting to the language, not only to accommodate communication but also for protection against vulnerability and prejudiced attacks. Even children are subjected to this way of thinking from a very early age:

The animacy of the world is something we already know, but the language of animacy teeters on extinction—not just for Native peoples, but for everyone. Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion—until we teach them not to. We quickly retrain them and make them forget...The arrogance of English is that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be a human. (Kimmerer 57)

Kimmerer’s final sentence may also be reworded to express that the only way to be worthy of respect and moral concern within the range of humankind is to speak English. We are actively suppressing our own natural innocence and compassion by conforming to the limitations of the English language. All these elements of suppression can lead to depressive sentiments; the physical loss of language within these various communities is an amputation of culture and identity. In this context, depression is a condition of colonialism.

Kristeva’s theory explaining asymbolia in depressed people can additionally extend to address depression as a response to social and environmental crises.

Colonial values and ideals have led to the destruction of the ecosystem; we believe we are superior and therefore hold no respect towards the things that keep us alive. Singh claims that, "by continuing to abide by the formulation of "mastering mastery," we remain bound to relations founded in and through domination. In so doing, we concede to the inescapability of mastery as a way of life" (*Unthinking Mastery* 6-7). The more we allow methods of domination to construct our lives, the greater our loss of connection to that which we dominate.

I employ Mark Fisher's concept of hauntology to lean into the despair and hope that trails my depression. Fisher writes, "...'haunt' signifies both the dwelling-place, the domestic scene and that which invades or disturbs it. The OED lists one of the earliest meanings of the word 'haunt' as 'to provide with a home, house'" (125). My book is the product of homemaking, and a recollection of a haunting. It is a domain for my melancholia that uses materials of my past to create a representation of my mindset, overwhelmed by the circumstances of life. While it is a dwelling place from one perspective, it also permeates through a habitat for other species, creating a new interpretation of home. The theme of "home" that Fisher expresses is central to my experiences with depression and my views of a domestic space as both threatening and comforting. My early life portrayed home as a dangerous space that should be avoided. "Home" was symbolic of verbal, physical, and emotional abuse. It left me desperate to redefine my personal understanding of it as soon as I was able to recognize that this "home" was just a house, which I did not need to rely so heavily on. Home could be anything I wanted it to be, if I let it. But this does not mean that the safe spaces I create for myself are not haunted by its past. I am learning to recognize that the anxiety I feel when someone in my home is upset or frustrated is a haunting, and I am learning to accept that haunting is necessary. My own depression is both a reaction to greater society's treatment of the land, and also a condition that can be remedied through deeper connection with the land. By embracing my

ailment, materializing its memory, and giving it an external place to live, I have a better understanding of the ways it plagues me and teases my future. Expressing my emotions poetically allows me to contribute to the attention it deserves.

Much like the invasion of Western culture in North America, haunting is not something we should toss away. We need to understand the circumstances of this invasion and why it is harmful, because we are responsible for bringing knowledge forward and healing. We can thereby learn what its purpose and affect is. Violence, disrespect, and rejection of reciprocity is manifested in the settler-colonial desire to make a home, but the creation of a home on false foundations causes human and more-than-human pain. Our foundation of establishing a home is damaged; in this context, home is a site of exploitable resources. Home can be parallel to language here, in which both are lost methods of connection, dignity, and safety.

Decay and Nourishment: The Book as an Ecosystem

My piece dwells in the severe erosion of a tree along the creek by my home. It is situated near a trail made over time by the desires of pedestrians (see fig. 19-20),



Fig. 19. Desire trail



Fig. 20. The site

isolated from the rush of traffic and urgent daily life. In warmer weather, the sounds of the rustling flora and trickling water create a sanctuary. In the winter, amidst the bare, resting trees, it is difficult to tell if this particular one is dead or alive because of its condition. What happened to it? Does it matter? Even if it is dead, it serves a purpose for its natural surroundings. There are so many opportunities for birds and insects to create a safe space here. There is an opportunity in the frigid temperatures of the winter season, where everything is asleep, for me to create a safe space here. I view this decaying ecosystem as a framework to new pathways. My objective is to reclaim this beautiful form that has struggled with life, and provide it with an alternative nourishing purpose. There is disruption and disconnection in the structure of the tree that can be composted, allowing for a rejuvenated language of transformation to emerge and flourish.

My research visualizes the book as an ecosystem that nourishes and houses new languages; in a place where words provide little comfort, the flow of knowledge can continue through gesture and emotion. There is a book that lives in this tree; it exists because of the tree and reveals itself to me. My book is a vessel for communication. The split pieces of the trunk are my book covers, but they are not a beginning or end to what I fill in between. These book covers grow upwards and out through the tips of the branches towards the sky, infinitely, until their natural or artificial end. The narrative that this book extends is a timeline of emotions and environmental impacts, growing steadily and imperfectly as its host does. Like all timelines, there are worlds that live before and after this story. Lying wide open, these book covers expose the vulnerable insides of this being that relied on its shell for protection. However, the shell I create for it is not armour, but rather an extension of support for the never-ending story that it holds. I offer the earth a piece of my fragile mind in hopes that we can share our grievances and heal together, harmoniously. Kimmerer inquires, "What else can you offer the earth, which has everything? What

else can you give but something of yourself? A homemade ceremony, a ceremony that makes a home" (38). This perspective is significant to our consideration of the reciprocity between humans and the land. Our physical and mental states require a safe, comforting space. We must nurture and respect all of our homes for them to begin or continue to be a sanctuary for us. My home is my body, my mind, and the environment that I live in. By developing a healthy relationship with the land, I am establishing a foundation of care and trust in each of my houses.

Even in the least expected environments, growth can flower. As the summer of 2020 came to an end and the colours of the earth wilted into hibernation, I came across a single late bloomer that pushed through its shrivelling stem. The delicate curls of its vine were angled and stiff as the petals leeched the remaining nutrients from its veins for one last burst of life. The contrast between decay and straining survival was awe-inspiring, especially in a mind so focused on mute darkness. Once I started looking for it, I was astonished by how frequently a glimpse of animation could stem from death. It confided in me the beauty and resilience that can be found in disregarded places. I was shown how decay can nourish other forms of life, sustainable practices, and our responsibility to the earth. This experience brought to mind the words of Robin Kimmerer who asks, "Why is the world so beautiful? It could easily be otherwise: flowers could be ugly to us and still fulfill their own purpose. But they're not" (41). Kimmerer's reflection encouraged me to consider the concept and perception of beauty. Does nature reach out to humans through beauty as a coax and plea for nurture? The form and function of flowers have been on this earth longer than humans have, and to us they are often markers of beautiful and natural milestones in life. Flowers will never go out of style; we literally would not be here without them. My fixation on flowers – their resilience and appeal – spreads through my poetic translation of depression. We need affective expression in the same way that we need flowers to survive.

The story that these book covers are offering to carry is a floral timeline that heals the tree's dividing wound. It flourishes and falls apart in chance places, all the while spreading upwards with plenty of room for continued development. Growth and healing are presented here as imperfect and non-linear. They are filled with disruption, disintegration, and decay, all of which stimulate new methods of communication, and nourish sustainable ways of thinking. Books can be a source of nourishment and a site of safety in the way they invite people into the story. They are a source of inner reflection, because our interactions with them are so intimate. Language is not evil – it is what has become of language that is evil. However, language can be used now to create new stories of strength and more deeply connected communities. Gesture and affect can become part of a widely recognized method of storytelling.

Decolonizing the Book

My process of decolonizing the book recognizes the harmful structure and implementation of the English language, specifically in Canada, and refocuses the narration of stories through more affective means. The linear and contained form and technology of the book is not an accurate representation of the more-than-human worlds they convey. In *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*, Winona LaDuke shares that "...just as life itself is a complex web of relationships and organisms, so is the fabric of a community and a culture that chooses its future" (200). Humans are not limited to one form of communication and narration. There is a complex web of languages that we use to relate to one another, whether it be verbal, gestural, sensory, etc. This does not translate to the historical and contemporary construction and interpretation of the book, which contains the practice of storytelling

and world building. Books and Western written text are reminders of the limiting and damaging structures that accompany colonization, including the erasure of Indigenous cultures and languages. My piece acknowledges the complex web of interspecific connections that the land embraces to help rebuild new and more accessible futures.

Alicia Elliott's description of depression in her book, *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, strongly resonates with me and emphasizes the link to colonialism. Elliott says, "Depression often seems to me like the exact opposite of language. It takes your tongue, your thoughts, your self-worth, and leaves an empty vessel. Not that different from colonialism, actually" (11). Here, Elliott narrates the struggle of putting her feelings into words. She is finding it difficult to explain her depression to her white therapist who does not understand the impact that colonialism has on Elliott's personal life. In turning to her sister who is studying Mohawk, gesture is used to further emphasize the emotion that she is trying to translate:

"Wake'nikonhra'kwenhtará:'on,"...She repeats the word in Mohawk. Slows it down. Considers what English words in her arsenal can best approximate the phrase. "His mind is..." She moves her hands around, palms down, as if doing a large, messy finger painting. "Literally stretched or sprawled out on the ground. It's all over." She explains that there's another phrase, too. Wake'nikonhrèn:ton. It means "the mind is suspended." (9)

Not only is motion used to describe this feeling, but the translation is a poetic expression of depression that we can relate to because of how we embody the definition. The depression and loss of language experienced here is twofold for Elliott – depression has her rejecting English, but colonialism – specifically the residential school system and status policy – has taken her Mohawk culture away from her. The effects of colonialism are deep-rooted and widespread. This is instrumental to our understanding of the steps we can take to restore the land; we must go

back to the root of the problem and reconfigure how to approach modern day initiatives accordingly. How can we shape a better future for ourselves and our kin by acknowledging and working on the mistakes of our past?

When considering depression and colonialism in North America, it is important to recognize that this land was (and still is) viewed as an opportunity for resources and extraction; ultimately it was exploited for masterful, monetary gain. But land is not a resource – it is kin. We must look to plants, animals, and other living species for guidance, as they created a home here long before we did and helped shape a structure for our growth. Returning to Kathleen E. Absolon's text, she depicts the centre of a flower as the centre of self; we carry a strong relationship with our roots, and they impact the ways in which we share knowledge, memory, and purpose with our future – or the petals of our being (68). External influences become part of our roots; they are inflicted on us and shape our worldviews. While there may be loss and harm in these influences, there is also the opportunity to rise and reclaim by adjusting their output. Addressing and activating a poetic mourning process, which Kristeva describes as a method of healing depression, is the photosynthetic method of regenerating and repurposing the negative energy that we internalize.

My research uses knowledge systems founded on a connection to the land to mend broken relationships. The collection and utilization of materials involves a process of getting to know the environment that I am working in, implementing a visiting methodology to make kin with the living elements of my piece. Haraway encourages humans to "...make kin, not babies! It matters how kin generate kin" (103). This relationship of kinship does not describe blood-ties between people, but rather personal, intimate connections among all living things. Not only is it implied that overpopulation is an increasing threat to our reality, Haraway more importantly uses this term to rebuild our neglected relations with non-human beings. Kinship acknowledges the extent of what nature does for humans: it offers us food, water, and

oxygen – everything we need to remain alive. Maintaining an attitude of “us versus them,” or, “us over them” will effectively sever our ties with nature and, respectively, the resources we need for continued survival. We have exceeded a point in time where the land tolerated our ignorance. The earth is retaliating by inflicting floods, droughts, hurricanes, forest fires, pandemics, and more in order to heal itself.

The construction of *Home Made* addresses these issues of a linear existence and making kin. LaDuke claims that our challenge as a race is to “...transform human laws to match natural laws, and not vice versa. And to correspondingly transform wasteful production and voracious consumption...In the best case scenario, natural resources must be reused or not used at all, and waste production cut to a mere trickle” (197). My book uses the elements of its environment and materials of creations past to challenge human laws of book design that have been developed and universally accepted. Rather than limit my narrative to a beginning and an end within its book covers, the story has the potential to spread further upwards as it continues to develop. Additionally, I encourage a more affective interpretation and dialogue with the narrative as there is no text to engage with. My piece offers a new way of reading, communicating, and storing knowledge. I not only connect with the elements of the piece I created by hand, but also with the tree that displays this knowledge, and the natural surroundings that emphasize the therapeutic qualities of nature bathing.

Conclusion

The objective of my research was to challenge the assumption that books are dead and oral reading is alive. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson recounts in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedoms through Radical Resistance*, “Theory isn’t just an intellectual pursuit. It is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence, and emotion. It is contextual and relational. It is intimate and personal with individuals themselves holding the responsibilities for finding and generating meaning within their own lives” (151). The ideas and knowledge presented in books are kinetic; they alter the reader and transform the paths we are on. We pull concepts, dreams, and new worlds out of the texts we interact with, and weave those fibres throughout the other belief systems in our minds. It is our responsibility as guests on the earth to “...emphasize right relations of the world, including human and nonhuman beings” whom Haraway claims are “of the world as its storied and dynamic substance, not in the world as a container” (91). Books, like our bodies, are manifestations of live knowledge. They express material, emotional, and spiritual value. A more inclusive understanding of this would assist in the restoration of balance and harmony among everything humans interact with. This may even encourage less waste production overall as we grow to accept responsibility for, and devote meaning and care to, the objects we surround ourselves with.

Books are not an escape for me, rather they open a door to another way of making. Through book design, I establish connections and relationships that once existed but are now lost or decayed. This creates a pathway to more accessible and universal methods of communication that go beyond arbitrary symbolic significations. My research creation demonstrates that we are capable of building bridges to re-establish healthier ways of living; just as we can repair these connections, we can

heal pathways in the mind that have been interrupted by depression. Strengthening these ties mentally and physically through poetic expression will benefit our quality of living. Another thing that I have learned in this process of research creation is that, as Haraway notes, "...it matters which stories tell stories as a practice of caring and thinking" (37). Storytelling through alternative methods of communication that involve gesture and embodied experience will encourage practices of thinking through making. This reconnection of the semiotic to the symbolic is a way to move from melancholy to mourning. Haraway further indicates that, "...mourning is intrinsic to cultivating response-ability" (38). By acknowledging that we are all in a space of mourning a serious ecological loss, I can more effectively take on my role as a settler and a visitor on this land and therefore make more conscious custodianship decisions. This is a learning process that I welcome to help alleviate human and more-than-human pain.

Depression can be healing – it can be a place to go to find safety. I am making kin with depression through the process of narration, intertwining my strips of paper into fluid caterpillars that curl around each other for stability. I intend to continue this process as the seasons begin to change again, revisiting my site and growing real flowers that are native to the area in the Spring. This will continue my sentiment of finding and creating life in decaying spaces. It is a practice of homemaking, and I am acknowledging the reciprocal relationship I share with the tree by providing it, its surroundings, and myself with nourishment.

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