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**FEBRUARY 2014**

**BAD HISTORY 2/3**

**KAPSULA**



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# BAD HISTORY 2/3

## *Production*

Editor in Chief / CAOIMHE MORGAN-FEIR  
Subscriptions & Development / YOLI TERZIYSKA  
Marketing & Communications / LINDSAY LEBLANC  
Design / ZACH PEARL

## *Contributors*

SARAH BECK  
MICHAEL DIRISIO  
SHEILAH WILSON

## *On the Cover*

ADAM CRAMB

*Vampire Song*  
2013

Acrylic/mixed-media collage  
30 x 40 in/ 76 x 102 cm

<http://www.talenthouse.com/adamcramb>

## *Mumbo Jumbo*

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# Prologue

i rise up above myself  
like a fish flying

men will be gods  
if they want it

—[Lucille Clifton](#), “Good Friday” in *good woman: poems and a memoir 1969–1980* (1987)

Legends lie on the fringes of history; stitched, folded over, loosely taped on. Their unofficial nature creates spaces for play and personalization—qualities that are inaccurate yet essential to our sense of the past. Across generations, storytellers young and old dispense rumour and rhetoric to speak about contemporary struggle through antiquated themes. Certainly, the dissemination of legends is in itself a unique form of pedagogy, which promotes the techniques of ‘bad history’ to satisfy our need for symbols and archetypes.

In this monthly release our contributors interrogate the wavy line between legend and historical account, exposing the ways society selectively prizes fiction over fact for the benefit of belonging (Gemütlichkeit). Suggesting that the recitation of legend is a psycho-social practice related to constructing identity rather than a historical function, each author brings to light the serious implications of preserving half-truths and undocumented moments.

In Sarah Beck’s wry and assertive excerpt from her novel *Currency*, the merits of DNA testing

on a suspected second-hand Pollock are cast aside for the nebulous value system of provenance—the lineage and social status of an artwork’s collectors. In the end, it’s the clout and mysticism of art historical knowledge that bowls over any logic of scientific evidence, and we learn a valuable lesson: Rhetoric still overpowers empiricism. Legends are often passed over by material historians and scientists as pedestrian cultural byproduct rather than perennial cultural production. With Beck’s example we see that the ignored is, in turn, left to flourish—sometimes to its deficit. Shifting focus to the controversial career of Louis Riel, Beck traces a dividing line between the fable of his madcap life and the curated genealogy of Métis people in Saskatchewan who wish to distance their cultural identity from the tarnished ‘currency’ of his name.

Michael DiRisio’s piece introduces readers to the sordid origins of May Day and the flubbing of its contemporary art incarnation, the Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts. Born in reaction to the persecution and public execution of labour class activists, May Day has come to symbolize defiance and the continued

STITCHED BITS  
AND TAPED-ON TAGS

fight against injustice upon the working class. However, as DiRisio shows, the Canadian government has taken measures to play down and obfuscate the origins of such a politicized history. Similarly, the Mayworks Festival has often been overlooked by contemporary art publications and news media. As DiRisio puts it, this “unwriting” of such histories, particularly those associated with problematizing capitalist society, mounts a case for artists to be activists and make work that forgoes the possibility of both “the legacy of political art and collective action [to] be forgotten.”

Rounding out our exploration of legend as ‘bad history’ is Sheilah Wilson’s piece, “The Invisible Inside the Visible,” an earnest recounting of her artwork for 2012’s (W)here festival in Pictou County, Nova Scotia. Wilson embarked on a quest to find the elusive, even ghostly, Seaview Trotting Park—a horse-racing track hidden along the rugged terrain of the Cape John Peninsula. Through submersion into local communities and the rich tapestry of their inauthentic oral histories, Wilson comes to the more philosophical conclusion that the physicality of the racetrack is largely irrelevant. Instead, its legendary obscurity sustains “a way of both providing and holding onto a framework for passage of time and importance.”

To the chagrin of the rational thinker, no amount of hard data can yet provide the same feelings of tradition, heritage and community that legends offer through the performative inscription of narrative. Each author herein aims to show that contemporary art has a

stake within this discourse and a role to play in illustrating ambiguities. With no clear standards or measures the inauthenticity of a legend can productively evolve to complement contemporary values. By the same virtue, imprecision suppresses voices and images that are inconvenient to the current sociopolitical climate. History does not need to be dissected so much as it needs to be carefully gathered and accounted for. The stitched bits and taped-on tassels are equally important to revealing a total silhouette of our past.

In the tersely wise words of [bell hooks](#):

“I, too, am in search of the debris of history.”

the KAPSULA team

*(Caoimhe, Zach, Yoli & Lindsay)*





# *An excerpt from the novel Currency*



## CHAPTER 10

When are the findings of a forensic scientist less dependable than those of art historians?

When a truck driver from California purchased a very large painting for \$5 at a thrift store.

She brought it to a friend's house as a joke. Her friend was depressed, and the truck driver figured her friend would derive pleasure from wrecking something. The truck driver's plan was to have a few drinks and then use the painting for target practice. The ladies started drinking and forgot about the painting.

The painting lingered in the back of her truck and traveled with various cargo until she decided to sell it at a garage sale. A friendly neighbor suggested that it might be a Jackson Pollock.

Because of the size of the painting it was also suggested that it could be an expensive Jackson Pollock.

The truck driver enlisted professional art dealers to sell the painting, but because it didn't have provenance it could not fetch its value on the art market. No one was willing to pay full price for a Pollock that came from a thrift store.

The truck driver hired a forensic scientist to determine conclusively whether or not the painting was a Pollock.

The scientist quickly discovered multiple finger prints that matched Pollock's on the back of the painting. As if that wasn't enough, paint chips from the floor of Pollock's studio were matched exactly with the paint on the canvas. In a court of law, if the painting was a murder weapon, it could be conclusively traced back to the hand of Pollock.

This painting is still for sale. From what I understand it is in storage and not being enjoyed by anyone, not even for the pleasure of being destroyed.

Are you wondering what provenance is? Provenance tracks a painting or other work of art through its various owners, appreciating in worth as it passes through the lives of the important and famous. A social guarantee of value, in the case of market artworks, cannot be ascribed by the hand of the maker, only by its association with its financial transactions.

People have provenance too, whether it's real or imaginary. I try hard not to make face when someone tells me their theory about their own reincarnation. Have you ever noticed that when people believe that they have been reincarnated they were never someone boring in a past life? You never hear "I was a farm wife with ten kids and died in childbirth."

Everyone was Cleopatra or some shit.

Unlike art, ancestry can be validated through science. This science has given us daytime television shows like Maury. Maury is a 'talk show' featuring non-actors' real life dramas. The plot of at least half of Maury's episodes involves DNA testing over embattled paternity, the other half are about poorly behaved teenagers and their distressed single parents.

In the 1990s when DNA was still new and exorbitantly pricey, a serious nighttime news show did a feature story on the wonders of DNA. The story began with the introduction of a tribe in Africa. This tribe honors many practices that are Semitic in their origins. They claim to be descendants of Aaron and call themselves Jews.

In Judaism you are generally Jewish through your mother. However, there are Jews who are thought to be direct descendants of Aaron, related to one another through their male parents. This bloodline is special and held in high esteem.

The Jewish descendants of Aaron in Israel donated DNA to the news program for testing. True to their claims the African tribe shared direct ancestry with their Jewish brothers.

It has seemed to me for most of my life that the ancestry of friends and acquaintances involved more impressive relatives. I didn't know much about my bloodline, so I began to search for impressive figures to throw down. I ended up with a famous Irish sheep thief.

I felt like an asshole. Kurt's asshole looks like this:

The asshole I am referring to however is a card game. Do you know it? The players take turns laying down high powered cards. The loser with the least powerful cards becomes the asshole of the following game. Being the asshole means you are disadvantaged further, having to hand over your two highest cards to other players before the game even begins. Yikes.

The bloodline game would certainly have regional differences. In Saskatchewan many people claim to be related to Gabriel Dumont, whether Métis or not. A Métis is a person whose origins lie in the blending of Native people and voyageurs. Voyageurs, also known as *coureurs des bois*, were French fur traders working outside of the law.

Gabriel Dumont is famous for his association with another Métis named Louis Riel.

Louis Riel was in exile when Dumont went to fetch him from America. Before being exiled Riel had been an elected member of the Canadian House of Commons, notably negotiating the inclusion of the province of Manitoba, formerly part of Rupert's Land, into Confederation. Riel was offered forgiveness by the Prime Minister in exchange for an exile of five years in America. The reason he was exiled was in hopes the territory he had represented might calm down. It didn't.

And he had also executed a man.

Riel was deluded, and while exiled his megalomania intensified. He adopted a righteous belief in his own power and omnipotence. Riel came to believe he was the divinely chosen leader and prophet of the Métis. When Dumont showed up Riel was already unhinged.

The unhinged Riel travelled with Dumont back to Manitoba. Once there they established a provisional government and began the North West Rebellion.

Divine power has a way of making you unreasonably confident in your own decisions. Riel's increasingly impassioned speeches began to drive away support the Métis did have with the French communities. Ultimately this did not end well for Riel who was tried and hung for treason, forever immortalized by his death.

Perhaps it is Louis Riel's delusion that created a preference for being a relation of Dumont. That said, old Gabriel lived a long life. For years Dumont had a rock star roll in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Who knows how many descendants he may actually have? Perhaps in our modern times Dumont would be on Maury denying baby mamas left and right.

One of the reasons the Métis began the Northwest Rebellion was a matter of real estate. The major source of Métis livelihood had become farming. This was being complicated by the Canadian government. The government was increasingly appropriating Métis real estate to sell. This real estate was being sold to new, mostly eastern European settlers who were not wanted on the best real estate they had already claimed

for themselves.

Before farming, hunting bison had been the mainstay of the Métis way of life. The Métis were already suffering before losing their real estate because the bison were dwindling.

Today we would say that the bison were endangered.



## Sarah Beck

is a Saskatchewan artist currently based in Toronto. Over the past decade her art has gained recognition both nationally and internationally. Sarah's first novel *Currency* is a humorous story about money, art, fakes and sea pirates. To see Sarah's art or to order your own copy of *Currency* visit [sarahbeck.com](http://sarahbeck.com)

## *Against the Erasure of Working Class Culture*

# MAYWORKS

The Mayworks Festival was first founded in 1986 to revive interest in May Day, the International Workers' Day. Throughout its almost 30 year history, Mayworks has sought to celebrate working culture and give voice to workers' struggles through numerous exhibitions, community projects and collaborative events. It has, however, endured no small degree of neglect. As with May Day, which is vastly overshadowed in Canada by our legally recognized Labour Day in September, Mayworks is repeatedly marginalized and overlooked. The only response worse than negative criticism in the arts is no criticism at all, and, despite its annual recurrence in cities across Canada, very little ink is spilt over the festival.

To properly appreciate the festival its impetus and context must be understood. Though at various times May Day has been thought to be a European import—of Bolshevik design in particular—it is actually based upon an international history of labour action in May. It was common in many countries for May 1st to be the day that contracts were renewed, which has invariably led to recurring episodes of protest and dissent at that time of year. [1]

To understand it in context we should remember that the latter half of the 19th century, which gave rise to May Day, saw a labour movement that was quite strong and arguably more imaginative than today's. Anarchist, Communist and Socialist groups were fairly numerous and Capitalism

was, though gaining in strength, not the totalizing force that it is considered at present.

The birth of May Day cannot be attributed to a single event because it evolved somewhat sporadically out of recurring May actions, but there are a number of events that were particularly influential. The first, at least for our purposes, involves Hamilton's Nine-Hour Pioneers. In the 19th century it was not uncommon for factory workers to endure 10 to 12 hour work days, which could mean starting work before sunrise and ending long after sunset. The weekend, as a time for leisure, did not exist until relatively recently; work continued through Saturday and Sunday in many industries. In light of this, a 9 hour work day would be considerably more bearable.

These conditions led 1500 workers and supporters to march through Hamilton in May 1972 demanding a 9 hour work day; a considerable number of people given how disorganized Canadian workers had been up to this point. This march drew solidarity from as far as Halifax, and helped bring together workers in Canada, both union and non-union. Despite this far-reaching solidarity women and unskilled workers were very much underrepresented, as was often the case in the early days of the labour movement. Though the 9 hour movement did not immediately secure the shorter hours that they had demanded, the pressure led to the passing of the Federal Trade Unions act. This act made it no longer illegal to associate with a trade union,

and was followed by a wave of other pro-labour legislation that year.[2]

### *“tread upon a spark”*

As the movement grew, so did the demands. The call for shorter hours gradually shifted to the demand for an 8 hour work day, with a popular labour song of the day ending with the lines: “We’re summoning our forces from shipyard, shop and mill: Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will.” [3] Tensions grew as governments failed to enact legislation that would ensure an 8 hour work day. This came to a head in 1886 when, on May 1st, 90,000 people gathered in the streets of Chicago, with almost half a million more demonstrating across the United States. This is often considered the first May Day as an International Workers’ Day, though it was not necessarily organized as such, and it was certainly not intended to recur annually. Nevertheless it set a strong precedent for widespread action on May 1st.

What followed a few days later on the 4th of May, 1886, provided possibly the most dramatic and central event that contributed to the founding of the annual International Workers’ Day. A meeting was held in Chicago’s Haymarket Square to denounce recent police violence that brutally ended a nearby strike. As the day progressed, clouds gathered and rain began to fall, foreshadowing the dark events that followed. The rain grew and a thunderstorm set in as workers started heading home. Not content to let the meeting finish peacefully, the police ordered that the remaining 200 workers disperse. While these orders were given, the 180 police officers surrounded the group. Historian Philip S. Foner describes what then transpired:

As [Samuel J. Fielden, one of the speakers] protested that the meeting was peaceful, the police waded toward the speakers’ stand. Seconds later a sputtering bomb flew through the air and exploded in front of the police, killing one instantly and wounding over

seventy. The remaining police regrouped and emptied their revolvers into the panic-stricken protesters, wounding many, at least one fatally. [4]

The following day in Chicago Martial Law was declared. Police raids, brutal interrogation and violent arrests occurred across the city. In the end the aforementioned speaker Samuel J. Fielden, along with seven other organizers, were tried and convicted on charges of conspiracy. Most were not present at Haymarket Square at the time that violence broke out, and none were in a position to have thrown the bomb. This was of no consequence, as the jury was stacked with business sympathizers and the decision was clear. Four of the eight tried men were hanged on November 11, 1887. Worldwide opposition to the hangings preceded the execution, with petitions coming from as far as France, Russia and Spain; all to no avail.

There was a militant government-lead suppression of labour in the years that followed the Haymarket tragedy, and the eight hour work day was still a dim fantasy for most. The pressure did, however, gain shorter hours for some workers, and lead many industries to institute a half-day on Saturday and Sundays off. [5]

The events at Haymarket, and their tragic outcome, inspired workers to gather May 1st and continue to call for change. Gains have been won and lost, and the struggles contain complexity—diverse workers labour in widely varying conditions, which allows for no easy triumph, nor even a cohesive goal. August Spies, one of the hanged men, summed up the empowerment of the labour movement that resulted from the hanging with his powerful words uttered in response to their conviction:

If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labour movement... the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil in want and misery expect salvation – if this is your opinion then hang us! Here you will tread upon a spark, but

there and there, behind you and in front of you, and everywhere, flames blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out.[6]

*“that I should be with them,  
that time is passing”*

Over a century later we are occasionally reminded of how stubborn progress can be. Though the 8 hour day is legally guarded, the increasing propensity of part-time work leaves many individuals working two or three jobs and an 8 hour work-day continues to be a fantasy. Artists know this all too well, as many have to balance their arts labour with one or two other jobs for subsistence. A privileged precarity, certainly, but a precarity nonetheless. [7]

The issue of arts labour was recently addressed by a project from Toronto’s 2013 Mayworks festival, entitled *SHOP TALK*. The project was organized by the recently formed ARTIST WANTED collective, and it revolved around discussions of the intersections between art and labour. For the duration of the Mayworks Festival Whipper-snapper gallery became the *SHOP TALK* search centre, which, for the first half of May, hosted *DAY- and NIGHT- job interviews*, a project by Wing Yee Tong. Twisting and reworking business practices from market surveys to job interviews, Tong spoke with artists not to assess their eligibility or worth, but to unpack and explore the working lives of artists. The use of *DAY and NIGHT* in the title references the multiple, often drastically different jobs carried by artists, where they might be an artist by night but a market survey researcher by day (as is the case with Tong).

This discussion is necessary for pushing back against the commonly romantic perception of artists’ work. It is true that artists do receive a certain sense of fulfillment from the products of their art practice, a fulfillment not felt by many who work under harsh conditions for products that they have no attachment to. It is also true, however, that artists do not exist in the former category alone, but

rather spend much, or most, of their time working within the more alienating wage labour of the latter category.

*Milagros for Migrants*, which was also included in Toronto’s 2013 Mayworks festival and has since been exhibited widely across Southern Ontario, focused not on workers who balance multiple jobs, but on those who dedicate a full 8 or 10 months of the year to one, often repetitive, task: migrant workers in Canada, a group that has been growing steadily for decades while remaining largely invisible to the general public. The project was a collaboration between Deborah Barndt and Min Sook Lee, both of whom have spent more than a decade speaking with, and listening to, migrant agricultural workers in Ontario. Recent May Day protests have similarly brought attention to migrant and non-status workers, and support for projects such as these seems to be growing.

*Milagros*, which translates directly to miracles, refers to tokens that are left at altars for protection or healing. Deborah Barndt, responding to the recent publicity of a car accident that resulted in the death of 10 migrant workers, created a series of altars that memorialize migrant workers using open suitcases. The suitcases reference mobility and displacement, while the milagros consist of references to both their native culture of Mexico and the fruit of their current labour in Canada. Barndt intends for the altars to “create a catalyst for dialogue between labour activists and food activists,” [8] though the alters may not warrant such a response in all cases as some references are fairly inaccessible without a certain degree of digging. Once one begins to unpack the layers of symbolism within the suitcases, however, a greater appreciation can emerge. The zappatista doll, for instance, represents the anti-neoliberal resistance movement that has been present in Mexico since the mid-1990’s, and extends the project beyond the specific experience of migrant workers in Canada, thereby pointing to broader social justice movements.



The altars also work well in dialogue with Min Sook Lee's contribution to the exhibition, which consists of video footage of interviews that she has conducted with migrant workers across the Niagara region and Leamington, Ontario. The strength of the video is that it highlights not only the difficulties that migrant workers face, but their resilience and, at times, conviviality. This strength is significant given that migrant workers often face long hours with harsh working conditions. This is made worse by their inability to respond; since employers are required to continually support the workers, if a worker speaks out they can quickly be sent packing.

This is made visible, and with a real emotional resonance, by the case of one woman, Betty (they are introduced by first name only), who had lost her job and been sent home when her employer discovered that she was pregnant. She has since returned, though through no small struggle, which leaves her painfully missing her 15-month-old baby who is growing up without her. In the video she states that "leaving my son was too, too hard, he's very young. My mom says that they miss me, that I should be with them, that time is passing, and all the beautiful parts I won't be able to live with them."

Another woman, Alejandra, describes the difficulty of being faced with 10 to 12 hour work days. This is significant given that the Nine Hour Pioneers, active almost a century and half ago, were pushing back against the 10 to 12 hour work days that they were facing at the time. The collective action made real gains in the way of union legitimacy and security, but even then this only helped so many workers. These harsh, oppressive conditions have never truly been overcome, but rather shift to industries that include workers who are less visible and less protected.

Mayworks, as with the many May Days that have inspired it, seeks to make these invisible workers visible, to demand protection for the unprotected. By overlooking Mayworks and May Day in the popular media we are

allowing for a violent ignorance to persist. It is true, as Betty states, that "time is passing." As time passes, this bad history roles on. Min Sook Lee, a former director of Mayworks and namesake of the Min Sook Lee Labour Arts Award, has stated that "working class culture is often erased or diminished or disappeared or manipulated by the powers that be." She argues that the arts are "the consciousness of the people," [9] but with such idle erasure we run the risk of falling collectively unconscious, of letting time pass beyond our reach.



## *Michael DiRisio*

is a writer and visual artist currently working in Toronto and Windsor, Ontario. His research focuses primarily on labour, alternative economies and socially engaged art practices. Recent writings of his have appeared in *Onsite Review*, *C Magazine* and *Public Journal*.

<http://www.michaeldirisio.info>





# THE INVISIBLE INSIDE THE VISIBLE

I am of a place. I return there sometimes. *I am the revenant, returning to the place of my birth.* The place is Caribou River, Nova Scotia. The place is itself. The reading of personal and cultural markers into a place defines it as a landscape. *Initially, I am hesitant to use the word landscape for fear it anchors one too specifically, or becomes 'quaint.'* [1] *Yet, I am curious about how the specificity of place can be examined and made unstable through an artistic practice.* For the purposes of this paper, I will use the word landscape in relationship to invisibility and the possibility of creating landscape through touch or language. My hypothesis, based on my own experience while making this work, is that a landscape can exist as an invisible and limitless fold between language and touch.

In 2012 I was asked to be part of the W(here) project (curated by Mary MacDonald), whose goal was to look at the potential of contemporary art in rural communities. Both

Mary and I had grown up in Pictou County: she in the town and myself in the country. When Mary approached me I had recently purchased a small cottage in River John, where I live seasonally. The village of River John is a few minutes from Caribou River, where I grew up.

I was particularly interested in Meh's gas station in River John, which functions as a meeting place for the community, general store and hub of social interaction. Although I didn't know what my final work would be, I proposed using the gas station as a **point** of dissemination for the commissioned work.

I had, for two summers, been on an unsuccessful quest to find River John's historic racetrack. The track, called Seaview Trotting Park, had functioned in the 1920s on the outer tip of the Cape John peninsula. Local legend

said it could still be seen in the land. The idea of a quest for a semi-forgotten landscape was alluring. The commission became an opportunity to document the process of finding the mark of the track by asking for directions from the community.

When in operation as a racetrack, the land was owned by James Murphy. In the early 1960s it was part of a larger area purchased by the Nova Scotia government for community pastureland. Since then, seven hundred plus acres of land (which the racetrack is part of) have been reserved for grazing cows in the summer. At the time the racetrack was built, harness racing was a popular form of entertainment for rural communities (similar ones existed nearby in Thorburn, Tatamagouche and Truro). There were frequently crowds of over a thousand at the Cape John's Seaview Trotting Park.

It was a time of relative prosperity in the River John community. There were ten canneries, restaurants, stores and a sense of growth as the boat building industry continued to prosper until the 1920s, when new economic realities forced this industry into decline. Fishing, another primary resource, saw hard times as well, and although stabilized it had to become much smaller in the 1980s/90s. In 2012 the ten canneries had shrunk to none. What followed from the loss of industry was a slow descent from a thriving community to one that, in 2013, has few young people and no viable industry with

which to attract or keep a younger population. Currently, 70% of the population is over forty. The popularity of the gas station as a central gathering place is in part because it is one of the very few businesses still in existence, and has expanded its offerings to include food, coffee and breakfast, hardware supplies, garden plants, wood and propane. This should not be painted as a unique or tragic tale. This is the story of **many** rural communities in Nova Scotia.

The initial components of the project:

1. The racetrack.
2. The people interviewed: 12 in total, with 7 interviews being used as documentation online and in the newspaper. All of the participants had some knowledge of the racetrack; all were over the age of 40. One participant, James Baillie, actually witnessed the last race at the track.
3. The method: Engage with a community through interviews, gathering directions and maps to find a hidden mark in the land.

The results were surprising. In all the interviews and drawn maps, there emerged the reality of a landmark not actually *seen*. Although the racetrack figured prominently as a cultural marker (and, I would suggest, emblematic

of 'better days'), its physical location was largely **unknown**. Two reasons became immediately clear: First, its **difficult** location at the tip of the Cape John peninsula. Second, the mark of the racetrack is embedded into the land. This is not a landscape visible with our normal vision out and over a space. We do not see it rise from the horizon. In this case the object of our intention resists the verticality of vision, and instead is marked *into* the land.

How can we know a landscape that is unseen? I propose that we know a landscape by having lived **inside** of it. Donald Meinig suggests that we must "confront the central problem: any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads." [2] The manifestation of this cultural knowledge can be either physical, or, in the case of the Cape John Racetrack, invisible to the eyes but made visible through language.

Thus, the title for the project became *The Invisible Inside the Visible*.

1. A shared cultural landscape, although invisible to the eye.
2. Invisible to the gaze because embedded into the earth.

The racetrack exists as an ordering system, a way of both providing and holding onto a framework for passage of time and importance. James Duncan states that, "The landscape... is one of the central elements in a cultural system, for as an ordered assemblage of objects, a text, it acts as a signifying system through which a social system is reproduced and explored." [3] In this context, the racetrack landscape functions *through time* and *of a different time*. Many of those interviewed referenced the racetrack as a pointer for current activities. *It was near the racetrack that you....* But it is also an important marker of a *different* cultural and economic time.



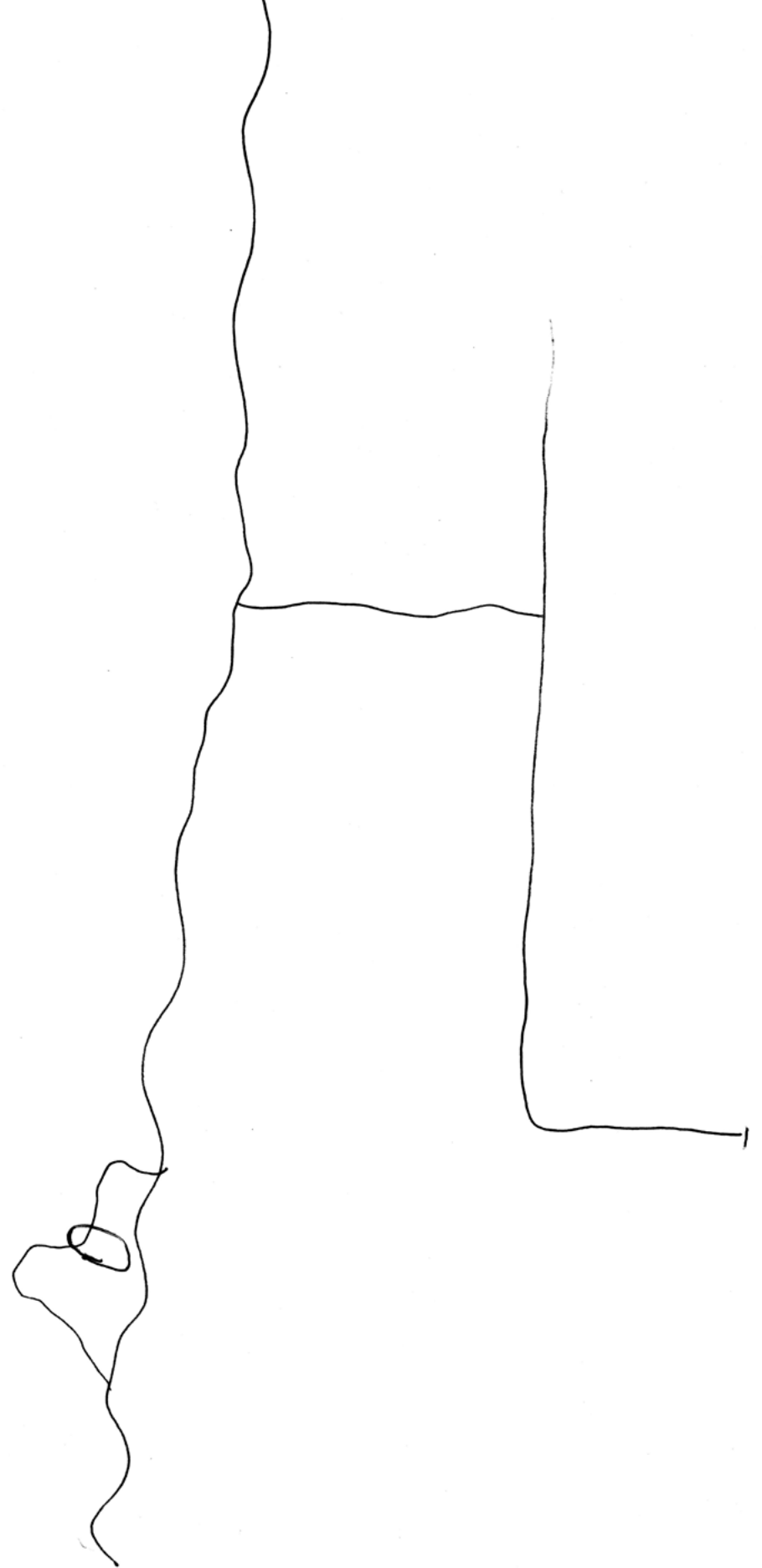
Although it continues to change its designation as a signifier, what it signified in terms of a cultural and economic time period remained constant. It marks the past while referencing present activities.

Barbara Bender argues that landscapes “are always in process of being shaped and reshaped. Being of the moment and in process, they are always temporal. They are not a record but a recording, and this recording is much more than a reflection of human agency and action; it is creative of them.”[4] Bender’s work suggests the creative movement of the landscape. This is true of the Cape John racetrack, where the societal memory of ‘better days’ was carried forward as the racetrack gained mythological and imaginary presence. It became a fluid marker in the community history, articulating a relationship to time and place.

This idea of a landmark inscribed into the consciousness without needing to be present physically speaks to the power, and need, for lines of historical and temporal grounding. Meinig states that:

By becoming part of the everyday, the taken for granted, the objective and the natural, the landscape masks the artificial and ideological nature of its form and content. Its history as a social construction is unexamined. It is therefore as unwittingly read as it is unwittingly written. [5]

The reference to text (language) is important. In this case, the creation of a mythology through language allows for a continuation of form. I am interested in the idea of the corporeal (body) as both a perceiving subject and also something that generates form through **language**. I am looking at various ways to consider the multiplicity of story—language and touch are two ways of **enfolding** multiple histories and unexpected conjunctions.



At this point, I return to the two kinds of invisibility that are inhabited by the landscape. The first is the absence of physical presence; it is an imagined landscape passed down through language. The invisible landscape maintains a sense of continuity and historical-temporal rootedness to those who live there. The second idea is the invisibility of that which exists *in the land* without any horizon/vertical demarcations. The next part of the project involved trying to find the physical mark of the racetrack.

The drawn and oral maps, however divergent they were in explanation of location (or lack thereof), gave me further incentive to go out and try again to find the racetrack. I did find it this third time. I was fortunate to have the aid of a community pasture employee, Ross. We went out together, after he and his co-worker made certain there were no cows in the pasture. We were looking not up, contrary to our usual way of knowing a place, but down. More than anything, we were feeling with our feet, excavating an imaginary landscape by touch. In this haptic environment, touch trumped all other senses. I didn't know the right way to decide when we had 'found it.' We kept asking each other, 'Is this it?' 'Do you think this is it?' We only realized that we were correct when we ended up walking in an oval. Even at this point, I kept asking if perhaps the grass was a different color in the oval. I wanted a visual marking of the spot, not merely the felt. How to trust this haptic experience of a landscape?

The following day, I moved dehydrated lime (used for marking lines on playing fields) out to the pasture and proceeded to feel my way around the track, shaking the chalklike substance behind me. All of the grass that was temporarily laid down by my passage, the white mark as gesture drawing onto the land—these were moments of a landscape from the past being illuminated in the present. In an extreme of both close and distant viewing, the mark made through the performative gesture was then photographed from an airplane. This aerial view made visible not just the white line of the performed mark (existing as a slightly unfinished oval due to fence line positioning and growth of trees), but also showed the many cow paths accumulated over the years. These aleatory lines showed the physical mark of time's passage, providing a reminder of land as material in a constant state of change and re-writing.

The photograph existed as another type of proof, or story, to confound previous ones that suggested the track was eroded to varying degrees. However, just as this mark ‘proved,’ it also disappeared (with the rainfall that occurred that evening).

The mark of the body touching the land and the language that created the structure’s mythology are two non-visual ways of establishing presence. They are both felt through the body before being articulated to the world. A process occurs wherein the story of the landscape rises *between* the articulation through the body and through the land. Between these two *felt* surfaces are multiples of embodied narratives. It is, as Merleau-Ponty states, “A certain relation between the visible and the invisible where the invisible is not only non-visible (what has been will be seen and is not seen) where the lacuna that marks its place is one of the points of passage of the ‘world.’ It is this negative that makes possible the vertical world.” [6]

These historical landscapes provide a way of moving outward from, and keeping ordered, our relationship to a culture in a land. I realized that the invisibility of the track, and its treatment as landscape in the cultural imagination, created a myth that included the “illusion of a stable past, partial escape from the temporal flux which landscape

treated as scenery unfailingly represents as an occurrence.” [7] Historical passage points, whether real or imaginary, act as portals through which lines of flight are thrown to anchor the present. I saw the project as an opportunity to explore the idea of performance onto the past as a way of allowing for inauthenticity, giving room to maneuver “stances of ownership, identity and interpretation to be confirmed, challenged, confounded at the same time.” [8]

The final step for the project was to translate it back into the community. I created an eight-page newspaper that included a centerfold of the aerial photo of the track, in addition to portions of interviews and documentation from the performance of the mark. I wanted to put the photograph of the mark, another story of presence and absence, into the collective narrative of the track. In this case the story was embodied in a white line seen from the sky—a temporary **hovering** over multiple tenses (past/present) and the idea of revenance.

**The newspapers were available at Meh’s gas station**, the place I had initially chosen as a dissemination point. They were also hand-delivered to the residents of the Cape John peninsula, where the racetrack was located. I wanted a document that would be authoritative in the allusion to ‘news’ and the inclusion of a photograph, yet also subject to temporal irrelevance and deterioration—of the newsprint itself—over time.

In conclusion, I contemplated the racetrack landscape, as it exists without recognizable visual clues, as being a unique tie to history and place. If the track were unreal as a visible physical mark, the most *real* would always be its most recent iteration. For instance, one evening as I was replenishing newspapers, a resident started telling me a story about the track. I was keenly aware that each telling was as authoritative as the one that came before it. It is a sort of temporal equivalency. Language charts authority over **place**. The importance of the track as a supposed anchor in time, from which stories emerge to establish a relationship with the present, was apparent. The worn cow tracks that diverge from and through the racetrack (as seen from the aerial photo) chart an authoritative physical mark. In both cases, the lines and passage of time create alternative stories, alternative marks over and through the original landscape.

Place, ultimately, is carried as a deep, felt map in the body. I propose it is carried through language, which is a way of remembering into body and of place. The stories transform the racetrack from a physical location in place to a physical location in language. This is clarified in the writing of Merleau-Ponty in his unfinished essays *The Visible and the Invisible*, where he suggests that:

It is as though the visibility that animates the sensible world were to emigrate not outside of every body, but into another less heavy, more transparent body, as though it were to change flesh, abandoning the flesh of the body for that of language. [9]

I propose that language as felt mark is folded into the body as one half of a fold; the other half is the land itself which holds the physical mark of the event. Together they provide “an interior horizon and an exterior horizon between which the actual visible is a provisional partitioning and which, nonetheless, opens indefinitely onto other visibles.” [10]

For a moment it was a mark on the land, visible from the sky. It rained. The mark is gone. The last story told is once again the most true.

*Language creates its own geography a thousand different times.*

## *Sheilah Wilson*

was born in Caribou River, Nova Scotia. She earned a BA at Mount Allison University in English/French (1999), BFA in Photography at NSCAD University (2002) and MFA Studio Arts at Goldsmiths College (2004). Wilson has exhibited her work nationally in Canada and the US, as well as England, New Zealand and Israel. Most recently she has been working on projects analyzing the traces between history, story and the land. Wilson has an upcoming residency as Open Studio Artist at Struts Gallery in New Brunswick (April 2014) and will contribute to Eryn Foster’s curated project, *Pictou Island Portage*, July 2014. She is currently Assistant Professor Studio Art at Denison University in Granville, Ohio.

[www.sheilahwilson.com](http://www.sheilahwilson.com)



