Concerning the Ottawa River

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Abstract

This thesis explores relations with the Ottawa River – both historically and in the contemporary – in the context of settler colonialism. Through a combination of archival research and ethnographic fieldwork, I trace how the Ottawa River has been taken up as a concern in settler discourse, emphasizing how these concerns shift and drift across time and landscape. My thesis argues that settlers' relations with the Ottawa River shape conceptualizations of control and governance through resource extraction, nation-building, and securing ecological futures. My research traces historical processes that have shaped the riverine environment and which resonate in the contemporary. I show how concerns about settlement, aesthetics, and the future are linked.

Settlement is a main theme in river relations in Ottawa's early colonial period as a lumber town. As Ottawa became a centre of vice-regal elites, chosen as the nation's capital, tension emerged between use of the river for resource-extraction and aesthetic concerns, which are related to ecological concerns around pollution and good citizenship. These latter concerns link with, while not entirely aligning with, the aim of Ottawa Riverkeeper – a grassroots environmental NGO which is the main site of my fieldwork – to help sustain a healthy Ottawa River Watershed now and in the future.

Résumé

Cette thèse explore les relations – à la fois historiques et contemporaines – avec la rivière des Outaouais dans un contexte de colonialisme de peuplement. En combinant un travail d'archives avec celui du terrain ethnographique, j'entreprends de tracer comment la rivière des Outaouais a été saisie en tant qu'enjeu au sein du discours colonial, en mettant l'emphase sur la

manière dont les problématiques qui lui sont liées glissent et dérivent à travers le temps et le paysage. J'y propose que les relations des colons avec la rivière des Outaouais informent certaines conceptualisations du contrôle et de la gouvernance par l'extraction de ressources, la construction nationale et la sécurisation de futurs écologiques. Ma recherche trace les processus et les structures historiques qui ont informé l'environnement riverain et résonnent au contemporain. Je démontre que la manière dont des préoccupations pour le peuplement, l'esthétique et le futur y sont liées.

Le peuplement par les colons constitue l'un des thèmes principaux des relations fluviales pendant la période coloniale précoce d'Ottawa en tant que ville d'exploitation forestière. À mesure que la ville devient un centre pour les élites liées au consort vice-royal puis la capitale nationale, une tension émerge entre l'utilisation de la rivière pour l'extraction de ressources et certains enjeux esthétiques, qui rejoignent des préoccupations écologiques quant à la pollution et à la bonne citoyenneté. Ces dernières sont liées, sans toutefois pleinement s'aligner, aux objectifs du Garde-rivière des Outaouais – une ONG environnementale communautaire qui constitue le site principal de mon terrain – pour le maintien de la bonne santé du bassin versant de la rivière des Outaouais, aujourd'hui et à l'avenir.

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I dedicate this work to my Babcia.

Introduction

Background and Rationale

The idea for an anthropological project involving the Ottawa River was borne out of a pair of encounters my family and I had one summer with two property owners in Constance Bay – a community on the Ottawa River, about forty kilometres west of downtown Ottawa. Within the last century, Constance Bay has evolved from a seasonal cottage community to one of year-round residents. When the land around Constance Bay was parceled up for sale in 1927, thirty-nine public river access points were established along the shoreline; these accesses have come to be viewed as "part of the community's heritage, to be preserved, protected and shared with all the residents of Constance Bay" (City of Ottawa 2012). It was through one of these points that, on an exceptionally hot day in early June 2021, my family and I made our way to the beach and began to unpack our things under the shade of a large tree. Before our beach blanket could hit the sand, however, a riverfront homeowner came out of her home, telling us to move: "My husband doesn't like to look out the window and see people," she said.

We moved, and from our new spot, just a few steps away from the shade of the tree, my daughter entered the river. Almost instantly, she stepped on the sharp edge of a mussel that was partially buried in the shore. Her blood mingled with the warm, shallow current and traveled east; as she made her way back to us, sand from the river gathered in her wound. Another beach-front homeowner, who I came to know as Stuart, called toward me saying, "Oh, I bet she stepped on a mussel, I can tell just from the way she's walking." Stuart entered the river and filled a toy bucket with water, which he used to flush the sand out of my daughter's wound.

Within the span of fifteen minutes, I had encountered two homeowners who, through their relationship with the Ottawa River, affected how my family and I felt within this space on the shoreline. In the first instance, our bodies were perceived as disruptive to an aesthetic relationship the homeowner's husband had with the river, an opinion which, after being expressed, left us with the impression that we were trespassing on private property. We were, after all, visitors to Constance Bay, which meant that we had a different kind of access to the river from those that lived there year-round. We were disruptive, but with our backs turned to the first homeowner's window, we must have been indistinct – a group of bodies that resembled other bodies that have tried to sit in the shade of that tree.

In the second encounter, Stuart's familiar and knowledgeable relation with the river allowed him to recognize, through my daughter's movements, that she had wounded herself on the edge of a mussel, and he knew which steps to take to alleviate her pain. Stuart's immediate recognition of my daughter's injury, and his confident steps to tend to it, revealed a depth of care and expertise, drawing us into a relationship with the river that was both protective and affirming. Stuart's intervention was marked by a kind of intimacy that has since tied us to that space, in contrast to the seemingly foreclosed untethering we had assumed we had undergone. How we related to the river mattered to how we related to each other, and how we related to each other mattered to how we would relate to the river.

An anthropology of rivers at times seems to perform as a river, by which I mean that although research is often referentially tied to a space, its materiality weaves and flows through unpredictable configurations that open up the possibility for new relations to emerge. I am aided in this conception by Marilyn Strathern, who engages with Paul Rabinow's notion of

assemblages as “preexisting things that, when brought into relations with other preexisting things, open up different capacities not inherent in the original things but only come into existence in the relations established in the assemblage” (Rabinow 2011, 123, in Strathern 2014, 4). Strathern does so in service to her argument that “relations open up the capacities of properties in unexpected ways and capacities come into existence through new relations” (Strathern 2014, 4).

In this way, I understand relations as not only shaping individual experiences but also the ways in which people navigate, understand, and constitute shared spaces. Our bodies and actions are constantly shaped by the relations that connect us to the river and the histories that are both visible and hidden, contested and taken for granted. This thesis is concerned with exploring how relations with the Ottawa River inform political, ecological, and social movements that craft the terrain upon which contemporary life plays out in Canada’s capital city. In order to narrow the scope of relations and to draw attention to the power dynamics that inform relationships with the riverine environment, my query is focused on the historic and contemporary ways in which settler populations concern themselves with the Ottawa River.

The Context

“Colonialism, first, foremost, and always, is about *Land*”

- Max Liboiron in *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021) [emphasis in original]

Settler colonialism can be viewed as an ongoing process and structure, described by Lowman and Barker (2015) to have “three main pillars”: invasion – “a structure not an event” (Wolfe

2006, 388); the intent of settlers to stay; and "transcending colonialism," that is, the erasure of the violent history of displacement and of competing land claims (Lowman and Barker 2015, 25-26). It is about making land unquestionably available for settler use, both now and in the future: "colonialism means ongoing settler access to Land for settler goals, this includes access to futures" (Liboiron 2021, 66). Settler colonialism is dominant and underacknowledged in both the National Capital Region and Canada more widely: "colonialism more than any other force drove the creation and shape of Canada, and ... continues into the present" (Lowman and Barker 2015, 14). Following Liboiron, I feel it is important to situate myself and acknowledge my land relations, to break with a predominance for white settlers to "almost always remain unmarked [in academic literature] ... (Liboiron 2021, 3). I am a settler Canadian whose grandparents were Polish and Ukrainian refugees who came to Canada following the Second World War.

The Ottawa River watershed lies in unceded Algonquin territory. Land dispossession is a long-standing and ongoing process, which includes the breaking of treaties (wampum) and the use of residential schools, the Indian Act, and the state welfare system. Territorial encroachment accelerated in the region with British Loyalist resettlement following the American Revolution. A petition from 1835 by the superintendent of the Indian Department, James Hughes, records that the Algonquins and Nipissings find their hunting grounds "to be entirely ruined by the White Settlers to whom they have been conceded, the squatters that have taken possession of certain portions but more particularly by the lumber men" [1] (quoted in Di Gangi 2018). The most populous First Nation reserve in the Ottawa River Watershed, Kitigan Zibi, was founded in 1851 and many of the families that settled there were displaced by European encroachments along the Ottawa River (Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee 2005, 292)

[1] It is not clear what Hughes meant by the word "conceded", as the rest of this quote suggests that the Algonquins still considered themselves rightfully sovereign over the land.

The settler colonial context pervades this thesis. For example, in the first chapter, I share examples of resource extraction (specifically timber), altered terrains, and land dispossession that relate to colonial settlement and infrastructure in 19th century Ottawa. Anthropologist John Wagner, in his article "Landscaping Aesthetics, Water, and Settler Colonialism in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia," states: "Colonial social relations are typically constructed as part of a process in which new and more intensive patterns of resource exploitation are put in place and wholesale transformations of local ecologies occur as a normal course of events" (2008, 33, referencing Cronon 2003).

Settlers' claims to the river are addressed in the second chapter, where we see how they are made visible through urban planning and landscape design that reflect specific normative attitudes about order and beauty and ethical claims about nationalism and citizenship. I engage with the ways in which these attitudes led to the displacement of some of Ottawa's poorest citizens who laboured in neighbouring industries. Contemporary urban planning, which I engage with in the third chapter, is laid upon those foundations. The National Capital Commission (NCC)[2], a Crown corporation and the region's largest landowner and "long-term planner of federal lands [and] principal steward of nationally significant public places," (Canadian Heritage 2017) continues to manage projects that were started by its predecessors, the Federal District Commission and the Ottawa Improvement Commission, as early as 1899. I use the NCC's newly restored boathouse, River House, to situate tensions between settler (anti)colonialism and

[2] The National Capital Act of 1958 gave the NCC jurisdiction over the National Capital Region through federal power. NCC projects and operations, undertaken for the "general advantage of Canada" (Legislative Services 2013, 12) are protected through the Constitution Act, which gives the federal government power to maintain, introduce, or enforce "peace, order, and good governance" (*Constitution Act 1867*, 80) in matters of national interest. Thus, the NCC can give itself jurisdiction over projects that they themselves deem to be in the interest of all Canadians.

environmental stewardship, particularly how it relates to the grassroots NGO Ottawa Riverkeeper.

Research Objectives

Broadly speaking, the questions guiding my research are turned towards the ways in which concern for the Ottawa River informs settlers' relationships to themselves, to others, and to the land. The dual sense of the term *concern* is important here. Concern is both a direct worry about the river's state (concern *about*, e.g., a concern relating to pollution), and the broader actions or planning initiatives that address a concern (concern *with*, i.e., "I have implicated myself in this concern"). Through this lens, I am able to get to an understanding of how contemporary concerns relate to uncertain ecologies – climate change, endangered species, water quality, etc. – while highlighting the ways in which concern can (often unwittingly) synthesize the colonial genealogy of the river and bring it into the present.

Settler concern for the Ottawa River has historically emerged where various political ideals intersect, with multiple actors involved in distinct projects of care that relate to the riverine environment. The contemporary field of concern is built on a legacy of these past interactions. There are ecological concerns, which the archive shows have always been a part of settler's discourse, which exist in tandem with the expressed notion that the river is an amenity that everyone (citizens) should enjoy. This latter sentiment also emerges earlier historically, for instance in relation to capital-building and the successive efforts of government agencies to beautify the region and shape the region into a place for "all Canadians" for generations to come.

I understand concern to be a future-oriented response to the contemporary conditions of the Ottawa River (in every era). Often grounded in a sense of uncertainty, concern involves an

awareness that something might change, deteriorate, or improve, which can lead to anticipatory actions aimed at either mitigating or enhancing the future. Following Whitington (2018), this conception understands the future as a predicament– an uncertain space shaped by past actions and present decisions. For Whitington, whose research looks at the complex relationship between hydropower and its social, environmental, and political impacts in Laos, uncertainty is "More than a simple future-oriented anticipation, uncertainty is experienced as an ecological predicament with biopolitical stakes, as an understanding that existing knowledge is not good enough, and from practices that, whether they want to be or not, are open to that predicament" (Whitington 2018, 6). In the chapters that follow I show that concern, in its relation to uncertainty, opens up the capacity for settlers to act in the present towards their visions of a hopeful future.

Following Ingold (1993), I have adopted a 'dwelling perspective' for my inquiry that reaches across temporal planes and landscapes to various groups of people that have shaped the riverine environment through their relations of concern. This approach, "according to which the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves" (Ingold 1993, 155), allows me to engage with 21st century concerns regarding the Ottawa River that are related to the region's colonial history: "The tendency to think of colonization as an event of the past, or as having to do exclusively with European settlers and [I]ndigenous peoples, masks the extent to which colonial practices continue to dominate the relationship of mainstream North American societies to the physical environments in which they live" (Wagner 2008, 33). Recognizing these entanglements is an essential practice for contemporary anthropology in

Canada, especially in relation to a politics that vocalizes truth and reconciliation as a central tenet.

Methodology

I was introduced to Julia, Director of Education and Community Engagement at Ottawa Riverkeeper, through a workshop hosted by the Planthropolab at the University of Ottawa. Ottawa Riverkeeper is a citizen-based, grassroots organization that works toward ensuring "a swimmable, drinkable, fishable Ottawa River watershed. For everyone" (Ottawa Riverkeeper n.d.-a). When I first met Julia and her assistant, Hannah, they were in the planning stages of the 2022/2023 Youth Water Leader Program, which I was later involved in for my fieldwork. The program consisted of workshops that were designed to educate that year's cohort of Youth Water Leaders (selected through an application process) about environmental challenges in watershed communities. Participants used this information to inform their public service projects, which were designed to address concerns in the Ottawa River Watershed (Ottawa Riverkeeper n.d.-e). The program was funded by a grant from the Canada Service Corps, a government entity that "promotes civic engagement among youth aged 15 to 30 by funding organizations that provide service opportunities for young Canadians" (Canada Service Corps n.d.). The program ran for two years, after which the funding was not renewed.

Workshops were scheduled over 18 weeks and were framed around topics such as watershed health, Indigenous relationships with water, youth activism, and water justice. Other fieldwork included volunteering with Ottawa Riverkeeper as a citizen scientist tracking algal blooms, as a "way-finder" for the 2022 Riverkeeper Gala, and as a participant in the organization's shoreline clean-ups at Brewer Creek in Gatineau and on Kettle Island near the

mouth of the Gatineau River on the Ottawa. Additionally, I attended three sessions of Ottawa Riverkeeper's Annual Public Meetings (in 2022, 2023, and 2024) and participated in a turtle release at Mud Lake in Ottawa's west end. Fieldwork began in an early post-COVID climate, where social distancing precautions were often still in place. As such, some of the workshops I participated in occurred online.

My involvement with Ottawa Riverkeeper allowed me to participate in a variety of programs and activities within the watershed. My fieldwork was structured around this involvement, making participant observation essential for my research. Participation with the group included semi-structured interviews. Audio recording was not always possible on account of the variable terrains where these conversations occurred. In these instances, I relied on scratch notes that were then developed into detailed field notes. My fieldwork was informed by the concept of "journeying" (Moretti 2017) – by foot, car, watercraft, or swimming in the river – as a way of observing the way spaces along and within the Ottawa River are used, inhabited, spoken about, and ultimately related to. The Ottawa River shoreline offered me a unique setting from which to personally practice participation, observation, and reflection in ways that were not predetermined but open to new configurations of relating to the river.

Another method of my research was archival analysis. The archive holds a material record of some of the ways in which relations with the Ottawa River landscape have been articulated as a concern by different parties – be it as a route for colonial expansion, as a source of economic prosperity, as a vital element for public and ecological health, or as part of an aesthetic image of a Capital City. Archival work demands reflexivity, *especially* when used to form a narrative about settler colonialism in Canada (as I do in this thesis). Through the course of

my research I have come against competing versions of "facts" that relate to the processes of colonial settlement, as well as absences, notably of Indigenous voices. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in his analysis of the archive and historical narratives in the book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) notes that:

> Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of introspective significance (the making of history in the final instance) . . . Rather, they help us understand why not all silences are equal and why they cannot be addressed—or redressed—in the same manner. To put it differently, any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly. (Trouillot 1995, 26–27)

Ann Stoler (2002) recommends looking at the *form* of the archive, the way it is assembled, noting that "The archive was the supreme technology of the late nineteenth-century imperial state, a repository of codified beliefs that clustered (and bore witness to) connections between secrecy, the law, and power" (Stoler 2002, 87). With this in mind, "scholars should view archives not as sites of knowledge retrieval, but of knowledge production, as monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography" (Stoler 2002, 87).

Structure of the Thesis

The chapters are broadly organized through three periods in Ottawa's settler history: Ottawa as a lumber town, Ottawa as a burgeoning capital city, and Ottawa in the contemporary. Additionally, they are structured around three main concerns that guide settler discourse about the river: settlement, aesthetics, and the future. These concerns reappear in each chapter, although their predominance varies. Each of these concerns is explored within the context of historical and contemporary changes. My fieldwork weaves its way into the historical narrative throughout the three chapters.

The first chapter takes place mostly in the archive, where I analyze the concept of land as it has been understood and written down by settlers in relation to the Ottawa River. I show how the river became part of settlers' conceptualizations of control and governance – namely through Indigenous displacement, resource extraction, and the building of infrastructure. This chapter recounts historical attitudes about the Ottawa River while tracing the processes that shaped the contemporary riverine landscape – from Loyalist settlement to the lumber industry's reliance on the river and onward to the river's role in the formation of Canada, a Dominion of the British Empire.

The second chapter, also predominantly taking place in the archive, shifts focus to the aesthetic transformations of the river and the surrounding landscapes, particularly as Ottawa transitioned from a lumber town to the Capital of Canada. With the rise of industrialization, followed by urban planning projects of the 20th century, the Ottawa River became central to the city's transformation into a place reflective of a nation. Urban planning, as an expression of the distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2019), functions as a political tool in settler-colonial

contexts. By deciding who gets access to what spaces, planning contributes to who gets visibility and legitimacy within the urban landscape. I engage with the city's physical re-shaping through commissioned landscape designs that emphasized order, cleanliness, and beauty as part of a nationalization process. I analyze how this re-imagining of the city visually erased the labouring populations who had historically been tied to the river, in the process of building a Capital City that was reflective of idealized Canadian values.

Using my fieldwork experience with Ottawa Riverkeeper, which I look at in relation to the NCC's River House, the final chapter looks at how concern for the river is woven into narratives about ethics and good citizenship. I share examples of how this science-based, grassroots NGO navigates the complexities of environmental advocacy within a settler-colonial context. Specifically, I analyze a recurring theme in my interlocutors' accounts, on the tension between participating in mainstream environmental campaigns limited by their settler frameworks and engaging in ethical anti-colonial practices.

Chapter One – The Terrain

After a couple of wrong turns and a twenty-five-minute drive east of Ottawa, Hannah from Ottawa Riverkeeper and I arrived at Mer Bleue Conservation Area. We waited at the Dewberry Trail Parking Lot for participants from the Youth Water Leader program to arrive, as well as Elyn Humphrey, a researcher and professor at Carleton University, who researches soil, plant, and atmospheric interactions in tundra and peatlands ("Humphreys, Elyn," n.d.). Our destination that evening was the Peatland Carbon Study research station out on the bog, where Elyn and other members of the research team monitor the relationship between weather variation and carbon dioxide, energy, and water fluxes in the peatland. To reach the research station, we loaded ourselves into two cars and followed Elyn, who was on foot and walking ahead of us, towards a gated, private access road to which Elyn had the key. Once past the gate, Elyn came into my car and we made a brief drive to what felt like a quasi-mystical field dotted with mesh balloons (for capturing insects), wildflowers, and an abundance of horseflies that were endemic to this little area (and which Elyn assured would not follow us to the bog). Leaving the field, we entered a mixed-wetland forest, via a boardwalk that was slightly submerged in the soaking wet bog.

We were told that the boardwalk was "not meant to be safe or secure," though it was quite capable of carrying our collective bodies into the open expanse of the bog. There, the air was quiet, the horseflies had disappeared, and the late afternoon sun was inching its way towards the horizon. Stretched out far in front of us was, in Elyn's words, "oodles of moss" – mostly sphagnum – blueberry bushes, Labrador Tea shrubs, carnivorous plants like the round-leaved sundew, rainwater, and a distant municipal garbage dump. The bog was saturated. We kept on our path until we reached a small equipment shed that doubled as a home for a group of snakes,

nestled together in a corner of a wooden cupboard. Elyn told us that the snakes were a welcome addition to the shed on account of their appetite for voles, who have been known to mess with the scientists' equipment. Past the shed was a "flux" tower and another boardwalk which led to a fertilizer-fed garden where the plants were behaving exceptionally by growing taller than what the nutrient-poor rainwater normally allows.

My impression of the bog was that it was a place of solitude, save for the PhenoCam, an eye in the sky that has been taking daily photos of the bog since 2012 (I was sure that I had been "caught" on camera eating a blueberry from the bog – it was sweet, and warm from its day in the sun.)

Figure 1: Image from The PhenoCam Network from the day of our visit ("The PhenoCam Network" n.d.)

The space was punctuated by various devices measuring fluctuations, gases, wind velocities, methane, and isotopes. These technical apparatuses, combined with the restricted access of the site, contributed to the affective nature of this boggy laboratory. Elyn told us that if

we were to step on the spongy surface, our footprints could remain in place; from where we stood, you could make out a pathway through the bog composed of footprints left behind by scientists over a decade ago.

Figure 2: Personal photograph. Note the imprints of past paths.

Based on geological evidence, Mer Bleue, like all of the Ottawa Valley, was once under the Laurentide ice sheet, a massive continental glacier that covered an area of thirteen million square kilometres (Encyclopedia Britannica 2023). The retreat of the ice sheet began around fifteen thousand years ago and during this process, the Atlantic Ocean flooded the Ottawa Valley, forming the Champlain Sea. The sea defined this area for five thousand years, after which "the earth's crust adjusted from the removal of the immense weight of the glacier and the sea drained" (Pilon 2005, 16). It was at that time that a rudimentary version of the Ottawa River took shape.

Mer Bleue is laid on top of a remnant channel, or "failed arm" of that early Ottawa River (Ottawa Gatineau Geoheritage. n.d.). In some areas the peat is up to 6 metres deep; radiocarbon measurements of the basal peat – the very bottom of the slowly decomposing matter that sits atop the mineral sediment, in this instance Leda clay (a marine deposit of post-glacial age which accumulated in this area of the Champlain Sea) – suggest that the bog has been accumulating matter for about 7650 years (Quik et al. 2022). The site is managed by the National Capital Commission (NCC), a federal Crown corporation. The rules that govern all NCC land can restrict or enable certain kinds of movements. At Mer Bleue, our actions were mediated by the "Seven Principles of Outdoor Ethics" (National Capital Commission n.d.-e), where picking and eating a blueberry can be considered an unethical act. The NCC follows the "Leave No Trace" principals, which includes "leaving stones, plants and all other natural objects in their original place and condition" (National Capital Commission n.d.-e). The imperative to be traceless felt improbable in this place of sedimentation, impressed with encounters.

Mer Bleue has been under control of the NCC since the middle of the 20th century, and much of its preservation is due to its natural incompatibility for land development. Early settlers

widely ignored the site as the land had no harvestable timber. As settlement grew during the middle to end of the 19th century, farmers and homesteaders saw the peatland as a waste, though there were (unsuccessful) attempts to dry the land through burning. Drainage ditches were introduced in the early part of the 20th century, which also failed to make the land suitable for development. During the Second World War, Canada's Department of National Defence expropriated the bog to serve as a practice bombing range. As the NCC notes, "Ownership by National Defence in the postwar era of rapid urbanization helped keep the bog in a natural condition, except for the odd bomb crater still preserved" (National Capital Commission n.d.-a). The bog is an appropriate terrain in which to situate the start of my research; it is an ancient site carved from flows, fluctuations, and failings. It is a sedimented, paleoclimate archive (El Bilali, Patterson, and Prokoph 2013) that emerges in the contemporary as an ecosystem of "exceptional value" (El Bilali, Patterson, and Prokoph 2013) to be conserved and protected.

How the environment should be managed by institutional power has historical precedence in the Capital Region and is a central focus of this thesis. The locus of this chapter takes place west of Mer Bleue – in and around the Ottawa River at Chaudière Falls, near the confluence of the Ottawa, Rideau, and Gatineau Rivers. Here, riverfront land was claimed by American settler Philomen Wright, who after vowing allegiance to the British Crown, sought to establish an agricultural settlement under the "leader and associates" scheme.[3] The settlers (Wright and his associates) quickly turned to the region's rich forest resources as a source of cash income.

[3] A settlement technique whereby a leader would receive a large tract of land which was then parcelled out to the leader's associates. (Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee 2005, 75).

Through archival research, I have found that events that occurred in relation to the timber trade produced and responded to the ideological murmurings of the time, including moral and economic considerations about how and by whom the river should be used. The archive is not a neutral space – certain perspectives are valued over others, and these perspectives are often taken down as fact and circulated as such. Archival work demands reflexivity; many of the documents that I refer to follow the narratives of colonial agents and early settlers and for this reason, they only tell a fragmented and subjective part of the story. The texts that I refer to in this chapter are situated in the nascent years of Canadian nation-building and are reflective of the ideologies held by some of the most prominent and influential names in the region at that time.

The chapter begins with Philemon Wright's establishment of Wright's Town (now Hull, Quebec), the first colonial settlement in the vicinity of Chaudière Falls. It was from here that the Ottawa River timber trade is said to have started. I explore how geopolitical events, such as the American Revolutionary War and Napoleon's Continental Blockade of 1806, facilitated the rapid expansion of the timber industry. In turn, these events were linked to large-scale land acquisitions and shifts in the regional landscape. Key turning points in the history of the timber trade, including the construction of the timber slide at Chaudière Falls in 1829 and the passage of the Reciprocity Act of 1854, ushered in a new wave of industrialization that attracted both Canadian and American entrepreneurs to the region.

This chapter then examines the contentious debates over environmental regulation in the latter half of the 19th century, particularly the adoption of the Fisheries Act (1857-1889), which sought to limit the damage caused by sawmill refuse in the Ottawa River. Finally, I turn to the creation of the Ottawa Improvement Commission (OIC) in the early 20th century, a federally

funded cohort of vice-regal elites who were tasked with beautifying the capital city of the newly formed Dominion of Canada. The OIC was a precursor to the NCC, whose mandate today includes the planning and management of "nationally significant public places" in the Capital Region (National Capital Commission n.d.-b).

The Lumbermen

American prospector Philemon Wright, widely considered to be the first permanent settler to the area now known as Hull, Quebec, began scouting a site on the north bank of the Ottawa River near Chaudière Falls in 1796, returning again the following three years, after which he obtained a land grant to build an agricultural colony (Legget 1975, 102). Wright and his associates have since become inseparable from the lore that surrounds the "origins" of the Ottawa Valley timber trade. It is important to note that varying versions of Wright's settlement exist. According to a report made by the Canadian Government in 2012 relating to the settlement of the Ottawa River Watershed, it is simply stated that Wright "purchased the land from Algonquins and Iroquois at Lake of Two Mountains" (at the confluence of the Ottawa and St. Lawrence rivers near Oka, Quebec). This conceals a more nuanced and complicated version of events. Wright himself, in a letter he wrote in 1820 recounting the settlement of Hull, shares that "the chiefs of two tribes of Indians that live at the Lake of Two Mountains" requested a language interpreter:

> To demand of me by what authority I was cutting down their wood, and taking possession of their land. To which I answered – by virtue of authority received at Quebec from their Great Father who lived on the other side of the water, and Sir John Johnson, who I knew

was agent in the Indian department, for through him they received they yearly dues from Government. They could hardly suppose their Great Father, or other persons at Quebec, would allow me to cut down their timber, and clear their land, and destroy their sugaries and hunting ground without consulting them, as they had been in the peaceable and quiet possession of these lands for generations past. I must consider that these falls and rivers were convenient for them to carry on their business, and that their families wanted support as well as mine (Wright 1820).

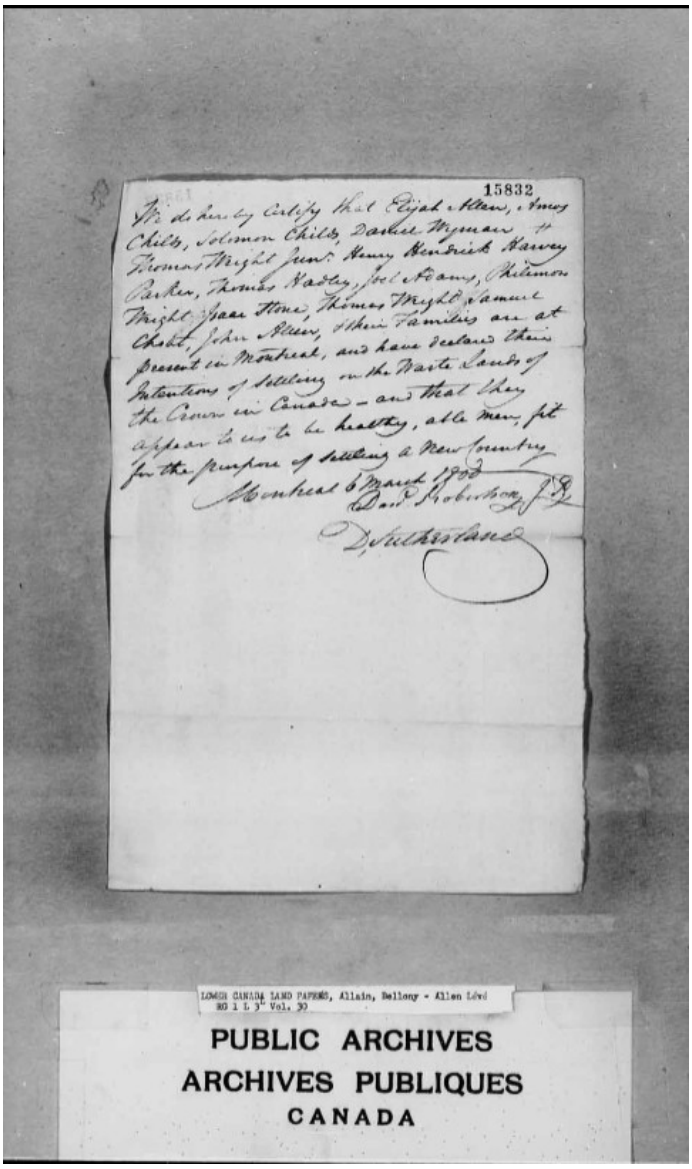


Figure 3: A letter written at Montreal, March 6th 1800, stating that Wright, his associates, and their families "are at present in Montreal, and have declared their intentions of settling on the Waste Lands of the Crown in Canada – and that they appear to us to be healthy, able men, fit for the purpose of settling a New Country" (Library and Archives Canada 1830).

The Ottawa Valley at the time was blanketed in woodland and the settlers "quickly turned to exploiting this vast and seemingly inexhaustible resource" (Powell 2020). After the American Revolutionary War, Britain's access to timber from its former New England colonies was severed, and shortly thereafter, Napoleon's 1806 Continental Blockade cut off Britain's Baltic timber supply (Powell 2020). These moves all but solidified the Ottawa River's role in Britain's "imperial supply strategy" (Lawson 2009, 9). After the War of 1812, agricultural settlers and veterans began clearing the forested land around the Rideau and Ottawa rivers at a rapid rate. In this way, land-clearing and the timber industry became intimately tied to one another (Lawson 2009, 14). There were few legal barriers to accessing timber, and both "emergent timber firms and more casual producers simply took what they wanted wherever it was found" (Lawson 2009, 12).

Wright's settlement was the locus of the timber trade in the region. In 1829, Philemon Wright's son Ruggles began constructing a timber slide above Chaudière Falls. Until this point, the Chaudière Falls had been the de facto western edge of the Ottawa River timber trade. When the slide finally opened in 1837, Ruggles Wright made it available to all – for a fee (Benedickson 2010, 732). The timber slide opened up new areas to logging, satisfying the needs of the British and, increasingly, American timber markets. While the British had been interested in long, squared cords of timber that could be used as masts for their naval fleets (Bouchette 1832), the American market desired sawn lumber. The relevance is that while squared timber could be processed on a relatively small scale, the production of sawn lumber required "the development of sawmills, and the capital to invest in this development" (Lawson 2009, 98). The timber trade that began less than fifty years earlier was transitioning and the landscape would soon follow suit.

Barons and the Sawdust Menace

Some of the Ottawa Valley's most renowned lumber barons began to arrive in the area during the 1850s, spurred on by the 1854 Treaty of Reciprocity that opened free trade with Upper and Lower Canada's American neighbours and the increased accessibility to forests upriver from Chaudière Falls (Kayser 1967, 29). American industrialists, such as Henry Franklin Bronson and Ezra Butler Eddy arrived during this period, bringing with them enough capital to erect sawmills along both banks of the Ottawa River (Kayser 1967, 30). John Rudolph Booth, a Canadian, also arrived at this time to take advantage of the New York and Boston timber markets. This was a period of rapid economic and technological growth in the area, as the production of sawn lumber accelerated. In 1858 the Ottawa Valley region, with Bytown as its hub, produced between 20 and 25 million board feet of lumber. By 1871, this number had increased tenfold, to between 236 and 260 million board feet (Ottawa Heritage Designation Committee 2005, 100). As lumber production increased, so too did the production of mill waste.

It was at this time when a shift occurred in the kind of infrastructure that was used to produce lumber. While the steam-powered mills needed for squared timber production used their waste for fuel, the water-powered mills favoured for sawn lumber allowed mill refuse to fall through large spaces in the floor-boards, onto the rushing waters below. This refuse would be carried down the river, eventually settling into eddies, bays, and other shallow waters where it could obstruct navigation, harm fish spawning grounds, foul the drinking water and, on occasion, spontaneously combust (Gillis 1986).

Starting in 1857, the Province of Canada passed a series of Fisheries Acts that aimed to regulate this practice. In 1865 the legislature passed a Fisheries Act that read: "sawdust or mill

rubbish shall not be drifted or thrown into any stream frequented by salmon, trout, pickerel or bass under penalty not exceeding one hundred dollars" (Boswell 2016, 208). The following spring, the Officer of Health for the City of Ottawa, Dr. Edward Van Cortlandt, penned a letter to Alexander Campbell, the Province of Canada's Commissioner of Crown Lands who was responsible for all things related to the colony's industry, fisheries, and navigable rivers (Boswell 2016, 507). In the letter, Van Cortlandt urged that "action be taken to restrain mill owners from throwing saw dust, bark, blocks, etc., into the Ottawa River, not only on account of the destruction to navigation and the fisheries, but also in a sanitary point of view" (Boswell 2016, 505). That summer, the Department of Crown Lands issued a circular in which sawmill operators were informed that they "must adapt their premises to the disposal of waste materials in such a manner as shall obviate further inquiry to rivers and streams" (Gillis 1986, 87). Mill operators were given the chance to apply for an exemption if it could be argued that compliance with this act would be detrimental to the public good. Library and Archives Canada retains a record of several of these exemption requests.

The Letters

The following exemption letters provide insights into the ways in which people saw themselves in relation to the Ottawa River during the second half of the 19th century. These letters address concerns brought up in the Fishery Acts regarding navigation, the harming of fish, water sanitation, public health, and aesthetics. Some of the exemption letters contend that these concerns are non-factual, with "no foundation in truth" or that they were brought about by jealous individuals and government workers who did not have any intimate knowledge of the Ottawa River. All of the following letters were found within a collection "List of Rivers

Exempted From Sawdust Pollution Act" at Library and Archives Canada (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898).

In one letter it is stated by the author that he knows of no complaints that had been made by those engaged in navigation, nor by settlers on the banks. He is, rather, of the opinion that the complaints could only have been made from one or two sources – either "a few jealous individuals who are envious of the Lumbermen", or "from the rowing men and canoeists whose sport may be to some small extent interfered with on some occasions" (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898). These issues take a moral tone when the author states that "A great and important industry is to be almost sacrificed, or in any case seriously crippled and hampered to satisfy the malice of a few ill-disposed men, and to gratify the pleasures of a few sportsmen. The interests of the entire Ottawa Valley to be sacrificed for the gratification of a few. For there is no such thing as seperating [sic] the lumber interests and the general interests of the Ottawa; they are identical" (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898).

Many of the letters rebut the concerns individually. Regarding concern for the fisheries, one letter argues that the Ottawa River "is not and never was what might be called a fish river", claiming that the sawmill refuse is of more value than the fish anyway, as it is gathered by "poorer settlers for firewood" (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898). Another letter states, "We do not know that fish have diminished in the river, and while it is possible they have, we know of no cause that can be adduced but incessant fishing" (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898) – in other words, 'there is no problem, but if there is a problem, it is definitely the fault of others.'

Another letter confronts the accusation that sawdust is detrimental to healthy water by asserting that "with all sincerity that we know of no evidence whatever to justify the assertion that any deleterious effects whatever result from this cause" (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898). It is worth noting that at this time, public health officials such as Van Courtland were raising the alarm over the state of Ottawa's drinking water (which came directly from the surrounding rivers) in relation to cholera epidemics that were anticipated to return to the colony in the spring of 1866 (Boswell 2016).

Among the 37 text documents that I read while researching the sawdust exemptions, the detrimental effects that mill refuse had on the aesthetics of the landscape were fully acknowledged and accepted. In one letter, a question gets raised as to whether aesthetics should come before an industry that is so vital to the area: "It must be remembered that this is a utilitarian age and that the interest of any important industry, the success of which affects the wellbeing of so many people, are invariably held to be paramount to the gratification of mere aesthetic taste, satisfactory and desirable as that may be under proper conditions" (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898).

Other letters read as veiled threats and reminders of the lumberman's power in the region: "such enforcement [of the Act] must have one or other of two results; either that the mills must be removed to some other locality, since Ottawa possesses no advantages as a lumber manufacturing point apart from the unrestricted use of the water power but on the other hand very many serious disadvantages; or that burners must be erected for the burning of this material, which will tend to create a smoke nuisance throughout the whole city and will doubtless be taken

advantage of by insurance companies to raise the rates … " (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898).

Many of the letters have a prophetic tone. Sir Sandford Fleming, a Scottish Canadian engineer, "whose high professional standing", it was argued, placed "any conclusions arrived at by him beyond question" was hired by a group of lumbermen headed by Bronson, to conduct a survey to disprove the concerns raised in the Act (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898). Fleming found that, "With regard to the future, it is conclusively established that there is no probability of the navigation between the city of Ottawa & Grenville being irretrievably destroyed or seriously obstructed from the cause assigned for centuries to come" (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898).

In another letter it is argued that lumbering in this way has been the practice for upwards of ninety years in the Ottawa Valley, and at no point were there "injuries to public or private interests" (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898). Other letters point to the fact that mill refuse was declining and would continue to do so because two-thirds, "if not more", of the valley's timber had already been harvested! Conservative Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald argued that "lumbering should continue until all the trees had been cut along a river; at that point the river could be restocked with fish at government expense" (Gillis 1996, 94). By 1920, only 4% of the region's old growth forest remained (Powell 2020).

Interestingly, embedded within these letters that oppose, or seek exemption from the Fisheries Acts, are arguments that are still held today by those concerned with the health of the river, including Ottawa Riverkeeper – albeit in a different context. One example relates to mitigating the effect of dams on fish. The author of the letter makes the point that the

construction of the Carrilon dam, “at which no fish ways have ever been provided”, has “effectually altered the character of that portion of the river between this city [Ottawa] and Grenville as a fish stream” (Library and Archives Canada 1894-1898). Even in the contemporary, community members from Kitigan Zibi and organizations such as Ottawa Riverkeeper have been petitioning for the installation of an eel ladder at the Carrilon dam in an attempt to increase the population of the endemically endangered American eel – a sacred fish with spiritual significance for the people of Kitigan Zibi Anishinābeg (KZA) (Huston 2024) – in the Ottawa River and its tributaries.

Evidently, the letters were effective tools for the lumbermen, and sawdust exemptions continued to be made under Macdonald’s Conservative leadership. There was, however, a growing resistance to the sawdust problem. The years of unabashed negligence on the part of the lumbermen were met with derision by prominent members of Ottawa’s elite and within the legislature. The different factions, it is said, “were driven almost to overt violence at Board meetings” (Gillis 1996, 97). In 1896 Macdonald was defeated in a general election by Wilfred Laurier and a new Liberal government was installed.

While Laurier was sympathetic to the lumbermen’s position, his Deputy Minister of Marine Fisheries, Francois Gourdeau, viewed the situation on the Ottawa River as a “national disgrace” and was determined to put an end to the pollution once and for all (Gillis 1996, 98). Gourdeau received the support of Joseph Israel Tarte, the Minister of Public Works, who stated that there was “no justification in lumber merchants and millionaires to ruin such a magnificent highway” (Gillis 1996, 98). This vocal criticism of the lumber industry’s disregard for the river’s health signaled a growing concern related to environmental protection. This shift would

culminate in the enforcement of the Fisheries Act in the early 20th century, marking a turning point in the regulation of industrial pollution.

The "sawdust question" marked a sort of nascent start to an aesthetic environmentalism that converged with urban planning projects related to nation-building. Growing concern for the natural environment was concurrent and constitutive of a distinctly "Canadian" image that was on the threshold of emergence. The crafting of Ottawa into the capital of a new dominion would lean heavily on both the idea of a pristine wilderness, and a British upper-class aesthetic befitting a new generation of influential citizens who desired to see their city as one day being "the very Queen of Capitals" (Gyton 1999, 13). Scholar Thomas Adam notes in his book, *Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspective* (2009), that influential Canadians acted as "agent[s] of intercultural transfer," stating that the "cultural and social infrastructure of nineteenth-century cities…did not emerge in isolation but was a result of intensive contacts and transfers across geographic, linguistic, and later "imagined" national borders" (Adam 2009, 3). Owing largely to the influence of these new elite Ottawans, the Laurier government initiated an institution to make improvements to the Capital City, through the creation of the OIC. It is to this coalescence of events that the next chapter turns.

Chapter Two – The Landscape

On a sunny and cool summer morning I joined the Youth Water Leader cohort for a fishing workshop at Patterson Creek in the Glebe Neighbourhood of Ottawa. Approaching the park, I noticed the group gathered near the creek and the Ottawa Riverkeeper logo on a flag near an information and supply tent. Also near the creek were fish tanks full of river water and fish that had already been caught by other group members. Under the tent, Hannah and Julia were looking at a photograph of one species of fish and remarking on its lateral line, which the fish uses to sense its surroundings. The sensing is called "svenning".

My experience with fishing is almost non-existent, though I do remember catching sunfish off an old railway bridge in the town where I grew up, and ice fishing in Northern Ontario when I was twenty-three. I was eager to ask the workshop host, Ian, if I could give it a go. He happily agreed and walked with me towards the tent where the fishing supplies were. There, Ian scooped a worm out of a yogurt container that had been filled with dirt. We walked back to the dock, where he put part of the worm on my hook and instructed me to just put my line in the water, no need to cast. A moment had barely passed before I could sense the fish tug on the hook; the fish was pulling away from me. It successfully evaded me but not before nibbling away at the worm on my hook. I raised the rod up out of the water and carefully brought it to Ian, who detached another segment from the worm and attached it to my hook. I went back to the water, put in my line, and again the fish ate the worm without getting hooked. I asked Ian what I should do when I feel that the fish is "on" the hook. He gestured that I should give it a tug. Third time's a charm.

Ian unhooked the fish for me – a rather large blue gill – and noted its spiky fin. Ian demonstrated how to hold down the fin with my thumb to avoid injury. He added the blue gill to a tank with a pumpkin-seed sunfish. The blue gill thrashed around for about three seconds and then suddenly stopped and appeared at ease. I took a photo of the blue gill and then put my hand in the tank to retrieve him. I cupped my hand in front of its nose and then moved my hand backwards until I came to the spiky fin, which I held down with my thumb. My other four fingers were under the fish's belly. I lifted the fish out of the tank then back into the creek, releasing it once my hand was under water. After withdrawing my hand from the creek, I could feel the cool air dry my hand, but I still felt "fishy" and was worried about germs. I managed to put the thought to the back of my mind, though I later asked Ian if it was worrisome not to wash your hands after handling fish, to which he said, "Ahh, you should be alright. I do it all the time." He grabbed some hand sanitizer from his van though and sprayed my hands with it.

Figure 4: Personal photograph. Blue gill caught at Patterson Creek Park.

Patterson Creek Park is one of the earliest planned public parks in Ottawa. Dating back to 1905, the park was part of landscape architect Frederick Todd's Preliminary Report to the Ottawa Improvement Commission (OIC) (1903). In his rather poetic report, Todd extolled the virtues of accessible, beautiful 'suburban'[4] parks, seeing them as essential to "the health and happiness of a great majority of the people, especially of those who are not fortunate enough to get away, or to send their children away from the city during the hot days of summer" (Todd 1903, 11). Todd endowed urban parkland with such importance that the "future of the Nation" depended on them:

> We have only to look at the present use made of Rockcliffe Park to realize the great good that is being accomplished, for these children who grow stronger and brighter as they romp over the grass and through the woods, must soon take their places among the men and women of the country; and upon the foundation laid in youth, for future health and strength, depends to a great extent the future of the Nation (Todd 1903, 11).

Todd's advice to the OIC was to prioritize the purchase of land on either side of the creek for park purposes before the opportunity was lost to urban development:

> That there should be so near the centre of a city as large as Ottawa a stream with such beautiful natural shores, and with such fine woods adjacent seems almost incredible, and it is difficult to understand why this land has remained unoccupied to the present time. That it will remain so long is impossible, therefore the take of the land on either side of

[4] Suburban at the time it was written, in 1903. The park is now urban due to the growth of Ottawa Centre.

> Patterson Creek for a small public park is perhaps more important than the taking of any other piece of land which I have examined, because it is likely to be sooner lost forever to the purpose for which it is so happily suited (Todd 1903, 25).

While Todd's vision for the park would require alterations to the land, his recommendation was to retain as much of the area's "present natural character" as possible: "Real landscape art is nothing if it is not conservative of natural beauty, and does not consist alone in building rustic bridges, or in arranging plants or trees, but is rather the fitting of landscape for human use and enjoyment in such a manner as will be most appropriate and beautiful" (Todd 1903, 26-27).

The aim of this chapter is to show how riverine environments in Ottawa (its rivers, canals, creeks, etc.) are discussed as both an aesthetic deficit and asset. I begin with details from Ottawa Riverkeeper's 2022 Gala fundraiser to demonstrate how access to the river, whether for recreational purposes or as part of a broader social movement, intersects with concerns related to governance and the right to interact with the river. I look at the ways in which the riverine environment has been woven into settler projects aimed at shaping the region into a place that "all Canadians" could see themselves – and their values – reflected in. I problematize this notion by engaging with examples from the archive that suggest the contrary – that urban planning functioned to affirm notions of "good citizenship" and national pride, at the expense of others, namely the Capital's lower and working classes.

Rancière's work around the distribution of the sensible (2019) – what can be seen and what is hidden – is helpful here, insofar as urban planning in the Capital Region seeks to create a

visual and conceptual landscape where the visionary projects of elite settlers are the desired "norm", despite the displacement of others in service to this goal. Near the chapter's conclusion I bring together several individuals who are connected through an area of land known as Tunney's Pasture, on the south shore of the Ottawa River. I do so in order to engage with the ways in which the sensory experiences and perceptions of urban planners worked to organize and divide the city's population in the process of turning it into a place "for all Canadians" (National Capital Commission n.d.-d).

The Gala

Soon after arriving at the 2022 Riverkeeper Gala, I was brought into the basement of Canada's Centre for Geography and Exploration where other volunteers and staff had gathered. I was introduced to the volunteer coordinator who told me to pin a ribbon onto my dress so that I would be identified as a volunteer. The dress code for volunteers did not differ from that of the guests – we were to be "river chic" in cocktail attire and no sneakers. My feet ached in the heels I had bought just for that night. I was assigned to the east side of the property, at an entrance gate near the French Embassy, where I quickly traded in my heels for my smuggled-in Teva sandals. Other volunteers were directed to other access points, with the shared goal of getting attendees to the Chair's Reception and Gala. Collectively we were called 'the wayfinders'.

That evening, I stood with my arms politely behind my back for so long that my joints hurt. My specific task was to tell those arriving by car via the French Embassy's parking lot to turn around and park nearby at the National Research Council building. There they would find a shuttle to bring them straight back to the Gala's front doors. Most were agreeable to this inconvenience, though one man expressed his displeasure by informing me that the Gala would

not even be a thing were it not for him, and that he had enough money in his pocket to buy all the land surrounding Rideau Falls. In that half hour leading up to the start of the Gala, there was a consistent wave of luxury cars arriving at the gate. Passengers would spill out, perfectly coiffed and draped in finery.

The flow of cars dwindled as the night set in. I looked down at my sandaled feet, taking in the distance between myself and the Gala, and felt untethered, unsure of where to stand or where I stood. After a while, a member of the Riverkeeper staff called on me to leave my post. I joined up with a couple of younger volunteers who were gathered near the front of the building, close to a wìgwàs chìman (birch bark canoe) built by Pinock Smith, an Algonquin craftsman from Kitigan Zibi, and high-school students from Ashbury College, a nearby private school and Gala sponsor.[5] As we stood around a tall table, a member of the catering company came up to us to offer us an hors d'oeuvre. A member of the Riverkeeper staff quickly pointed to our ribbons and shook her head to signal that we were not, in fact, guests at the Gala.

I moved uneasily around the space but was met with the occasional smile. I situated myself under the event tent just in time for the welcome speech by Ottawa Riverkeeper CEO, Laura Reinsborough. Her voice, unfortunately, was drowned out by the crowd and it was difficult, if not impossible, to make out what she was saying. The Master of Ceremonies, Evan Solomon,[6] told the raucous crowd that "they deserved this night" after living through the height of the pandemic. That evening, former National Hockey League player Daniel Alfredsson was

[5] From 2023-2024 Ottawa Riverkeeper, together with Pinock Smith and the Assembly of Seven Generations, hosted a "Canoeing Together" workshop with Indigenous youth to source and build a wìgwàs chiman at River House. The workshop brought to light the precarity of this traditional craft, which relies on a healthy watershed to complete. The wìgwàs chiman was launched successfully in August 2025 at River House. (Ottawa Riverkeeper, n.d.- f).
[6] Evan Solomon is well-known in Canada as a political broadcaster and writer. In April 2025, Solomon was elected as a federal Member of Parliament. At the time of writing this thesis, he is the current Minister of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Innovation in Mark Carney's Liberal government.

made an honorary Riverkeeper and was presented with a hand-made canoe paddle, while Senator Rosa Galvez was recognized as that year's Water Leader, someone who has committed themselves to interacting, advocating, and protecting the watershed, in addition to inspiring others to do the same (Brocklehurst 2019).

Over 400 people attended Ottawa Riverkeeper's largest fund-raising event of the year that night. Between ticket sales ($350 each), an online auction that included a 15-foot custom-built sailboat, and donations, Ottawa Riverkeeper raised $296,138 that evening (Ottawa Riverkeeper Inc. Financial Statements). The money raised went towards the everyday running of the organization, which includes watershed research, facilitating citizen science, advocacy work, education, and pollution monitoring. Foundations, individual gifts, government grants and subsidies, and corporate donations contribute to the rest of Ottawa Riverkeeper's annual income. Put plainly, the work that Ottawa Riverkeeper does throughout the year relies on maintaining relationships with an elite cohort of individuals, government bodies, businesses, and institutions that have committed to helping Ottawa Riverkeeper achieve its goal of ensuring a "swimmable, drinkable, and fishable watershed – for everyone" (Ottawa Riverkeeper n.d.-a).

Speaking about the Gala at Ottawa Riverkeeper's Annual Public Meeting in November 2022, which was sponsored and hosted by the Denton Company in downtown Ottawa, Geoff Green (Chair of the Board of Directors at the time) extolled the Gala as "the best party in town, right on the shores of the river at Rideau Falls". He then turned his attention to a group of people and asked "Why weren't you at the Gala? You guys got to go next year. It was an amazing event, as it always is, just filled with lovers of the river and the watershed – great friends and just great people". While Ottawa Riverkeeper's galas function as fundraising events for the environmental

work that the organization does throughout the year, they are simultaneously aesthetic events for Ottawa's elite to mingle and be seen visibly aligning with the missive of Ottawa Riverkeeper, which is to "inspire cooperative action focused toward a healthy watershed for all generations and all species," based on the belief that "people protect what they love" (Ottawa Riverkeeper n.d.-a). When Paul Dewar, former NDP MP for Ottawa Centre, was distinguished as a Water Leader at the 2018 Gala, he shared his belief that "water unites us all. It connects us all, no matter what your (political) party, no matter where you live, no matter who you are. It is our collective responsibility to preserve it for future generations" (Phillips, 2018).

Aesthetic Transformations of Ottawa and the Ottawa River

The New Edinburgh neighbourhood where the Ottawa Riverkeeper gala was held was founded by Scottish stonemason Thomas Mackay. In 1823, a large tract of land was secured by Lord Dalhousie for the construction of the Rideau Canal. English military engineer, Lieutenant-Colonel John By was assigned by the British Crown to lead the project. Colonel By engaged Mackay to build the Ottawa entrance locks. The construction of the canal made Mackay a very rich man – estimates suggest that he had profited around £32,000 by the end of his contract. Alastair Sweeny, in his book *Thomas Mackay: the Laird of Rideau Hall and the founding of Ottawa* (2022) suggests that by paying Rideau Canal contractors such as Mackay handsomely, the British gained influence over "solid citizens" who would "invest their capital in the Canadas and work to keep Canada British" (Sweeny 2022, 136); "Thomas Mackay's duty became clear – to help the young military settlement of Bytown grow and prosper, turning it into a city worthy of becoming the capital of a new nation" (Sweeny 2022, 137).

Mackay used his profits to invest in shipping, railways, and the buying and leasing of property around Rideau Falls. There he founded the village of New Edinburgh, where he built a lumber and grist mill (where the Royal Canadian Geographical Society now stands), a distillery, a schoolhouse, a curling rink and his palatial home, "Mackay's Castle", today known as Rideau Hall, the official residence of His Majesty The King's representative at the federal level in Canada – "the oldest continuous institution in Canada and an unbroken link with the early days of European settlement in our country" (Canadian Heritage 2017).

Mackay and his contemporaries were steadfast in their predictions that Bytown would one day become the legislative seat of Canada. Lord Dalhousie is rumoured to have said to a crowd on Barrack's Hill (now called Parliament Hill), "would you not be startled were I to add, that on that eminence may one day be the seat of Government?" (Knight 1974, 11). Colonel By, when he began leasing Ordnance land for the settlement of Bytown assured residents that "This land will be very valuable some day. It will be the Capital of Canada" (Sweeny 2022, 207). Mackay also predicted that it was "not unlikely that it [Bytown] will be the seat of government of the Canadas before many years" (Sweeny 2022, 207). Dr. Andrew Christie, a prominent member of Bytown's elite who, in addition to publishing the "Emigrant's Assistant", a practical guide for new settlers in the colony, published over twenty-five articles in the Bytown Gazette (which he owned) promoting the village as future capital (Sweeny 2022, 208).

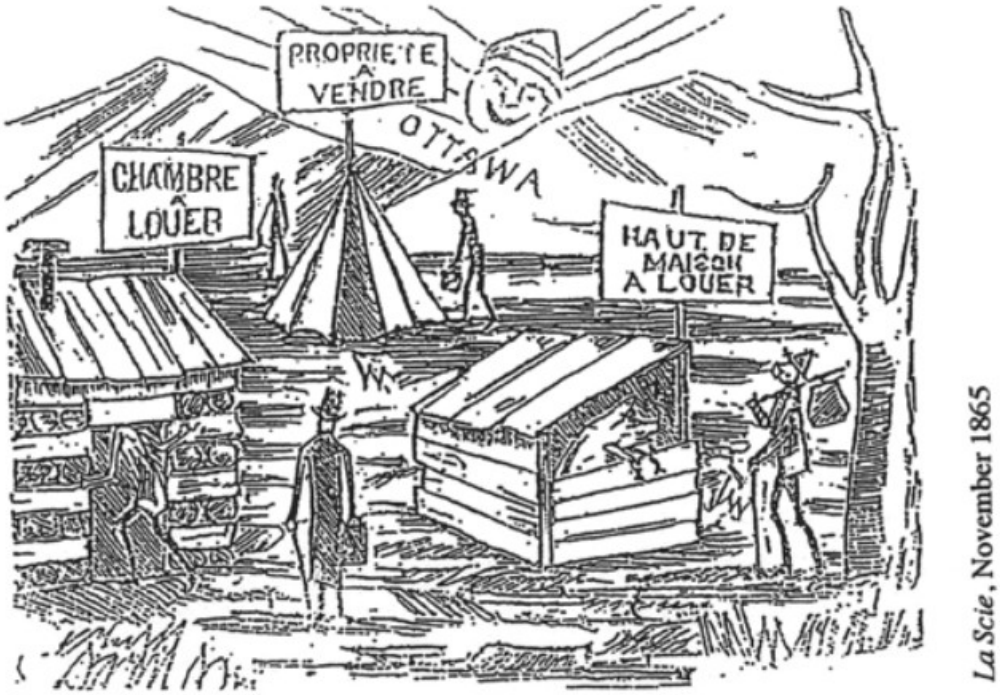
In 1855 Bytown was renamed Ottawa and was seriously being considered as the Capital of the Province of Canada, which at the time was still a British colony. Included in the letters Governor-General Sir Edmund Head sent to Queen Victoria, endorsing Ottawa as Capital City, were influential sketches of Barracks Hill overlooking the Ottawa River, drawn by his wife,

Lady Anna Maria Head. It has been suggested that these letters solidified the Queen's resolve on the matter and in 1857, by royal decree, a lumber village became a government city. Queen Victoria's decision was contested repeatedly in Parliament, and it would be another two years before the Legislative Assembly of Canada formally agreed to Ottawa being the permanent Capital of the Dominion of Canada, in February of 1859.

The Capital City

"Ottawa means exile emphasized, accompanied by a feeling of hopelessness. Happily, Ottawa does not mean Canada, nor does it represent Canada." – Lady Aberdeen, Ishbel Gordon, personal diary, 1895. Wife of Governor-General, Lord Aberdeen (Gordon 1960).

Making Ottawa the Capital of Canada was an evacuation order for the viceregal politicians who, until that point, were living in more established cities such as Toronto, Kingston, Montreal, and Quebec. These elite, high-ranking, "hegemonic leaders" were part of what has been described as "The Family Compact" – "a self-appointed aristocracy dedicated to advancing its own economic, social and religious interests" (Bennett and Jaenen 1986, in Barclay 2015, 3). Ottawa was a town marked by the lumber industry and had a reputation for being "one of the roughest, booziest, least law-abiding towns in North America. The streets were dark and unpaved, there was no sewer system, no running water (unless one counts the rivers), and disease ran rife" (Gordon 2006). Essayist Goldwin Smith, described as "somewhat of an opportunistic social climber" who married a Family Compact widow, called Ottawa at that time "a sub-Arctic lumber village, converted by royal mandate into a political cockpit" (Barclay 2015, 56). Political cartoons at the time also provided commentary on the situation:



ARRIVEE DES EMPLOYES DU GOUVERNEMENT A OTTAWA.
[Note: "à vendre" means "for sale" and "à louer" means "for rent."]

Figure 5: Source: Trépanier 2015.

Future Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier, stated in a lecture at Montreal in 1882 that:

> It may, perhaps, not be misplaced, at the start, to say a word relative to the capital. The subject is a delicate one; I would not wish to say anything disparaging of the capital, but it is hard to say anything good of it. Ottawa is not a handsome city, and does not appear destined to become one either. There is, however, in it one point of beauty – the site of the Parliament Buildings, on a cliff rising up from the bed of the river, not far from the falls which have been rendered famous by the accounts of every traveller since Champlain. This is Ottawa's only natural beauty. Behind the cliff, the land sinks into a

> monotonous plain, with a flat horizon unbroken by a single line. (Laurier 1882, in Barthe 1890, 173)

Once he was made Prime Minister, however, Laurier's tone changed. In 1893 he promised "to make the city of Ottawa as attractive as possibly could be; to make it the centre of the intellectual development of this country and above all the Washington of the North" (Gordon 2001, 10). Amidst complaints from the city of Ottawa over tax revenues (the Crown did not pay taxes on its properties and thus contributed nothing to the upkeep of the city) and at the urging of his circle of friends, including the "successive consorts of governors general" who "lamented the discomfort of Ottawa streets and the agony of being transported over such rough roads even for the short distance from Rideau Hall to the Parliament Buildings," Laurier petitioned his Minister of Finance and Receiver General, William S. Fielding, to made federal funds available for improvements to the city (Gyton 1999, 13). These federal funds, at $60,000 per annum, enabled the creation of the OIC in 1899.

American landscape architect and proponent of the "City Beautiful Movement" Frederick Todd, was hired by Laurier's government to conceive of a plan for the capital. In 1903, Todd presented the OIC with a report outlining his vision for the city where he stated:

> Not only is Ottawa sure to become the centre of a large and populous district, but the fact that it is the Capital of an immense country whose future greatness is only beginning to unfold, renders it necessary that it shall also be the centre of all those things which are an

> index of man's highest intellectual attainments, and that it be a city which will reflect the character of the nation, and the dignity, stability, and good taste of its citizens.
>
> Ottawa is at present a manufacturing city of considerable importance, and is destined to become great in this respect owing to its immense water-power. The industries, however, should be so regulated that they will interfere as little as possible with the beauty of the city, for a Capital city belongs to a certain extent to the whole country, and should not be placed in such a position that any one man, or company of men, can have it in their power to seriously mar its beauty, and thus throw discredit on the Nation. (Todd 1903, 5-6)

Todd took a considered approach to Lady Aberdeen's desire for a stately drive connecting Rideau Hall with the Parliament Building:

> The views which may be obtained are magnificent. The Parliament Buildings, rising above the cedar clad Nepean Point dominate the view cityward, while the views up and down the Ottawa River and over the City of Hull to the Laurentian Mountains are so grand and so diversified that it is impossible we should ever tire of them. They change with every turn of the road, with every whim of the elements; they change with the time and the seasons, and though changed in detail, in light and shade, and in coloring, they remain still the same impressive views. Paris may spend a fortune on her grand avenues, Washington and Chicago may spend millions in constructing boulevards, but none of them can equal in grandness or impressive scenery, a boulevard constructed along this bank of the Ottawa River (Todd 1903, 17-18).

Ultimately, Frederick Todd's vision for Ottawa was not fully realized, eschewed in favour of piecemeal projects. In 1927, the OIC was reorganized under a new name, the Federal District Commission (FDC). The FDC worked to expand the Capital's open spaces, including the acquisition of large parcels of land in Quebec for the formation of Gatineau Park (Lait 2021). In 1936, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King invited French town planner Jacques Gréber to advise on a plan for the capital. A report was produced in 1939, but the plans therein were not implemented on account of Canada's involvement in the Second World War. After the war, Gréber was again retained, and in 1950 Gréber submitted his report, the *Plan for the National Capital* (Gréber 1950).

In 1958, Parliament passed the National Capital Act (amended in 1988) which delineated the boundaries of the National Capital Region and established the National Capital Commission (NCC). With this act, the NCC was bestowed statutory authority to implement the Gréber plan, up to and including the expropriation of lands, if so needed, "to assist in the development, conservation and improvement of the National Capital Region in order that the nature and character of the seat of the Government of Canada may be in accordance with its national significance" (Legislative Services 2013).

The Gréber Plan

Frederic Erskine Bronson was the Chairman of the FDC at the time the Gréber Plan was commissioned. It is nothing short of ironic that the grandson of one Ottawa's most prominent sawmill operators, Henry Franklin Bronson, was helming Gréber's plan to erase the traces of industry from the shores of the Ottawa River. The *Plan for the National Capital* (1950) begins

with Gréber reminiscing about Prime Minister MacKenzie-King, extolling his "firm determination to provide for Canada a Capital worthy of the growth and progress of this great nation, thus interpreting the national pride and aspirations of its people" (Gréber 1950, 1). He continues, referencing the 1939 report: "The plans then envisioned were confined to a limited area of the City of Ottawa, but the Prime Minister, in his desire that Ottawa should be truly representative of Canada as its National Capital, had in mind a work of greater magnitude" (Gréber 1950, 1).

If the capital was to be truly representative of Canada, then the planning of the city needed to be done on a larger scale than what was previously discussed and done before. To do so, however, the landscape needed to be scrubbed clean of industrial detritus. In Part 13 of the plan, titled "Aesthetics", Gréber shares his opinion that:

> Progress, through the exploitation of it natural forces, and the ill-considered use of the land, has somewhat begun to stifle and mar the scenery. Across the river from the stately buildings of the nation are piles of unsightly and disorderly industrial materials, factories, railway sidings, warehouses, and chimney stacks spreading soot, smell and smoke. The beauty of the Chaudière Falls is hardly perceptible …
>
> Let us look instead to the areas on each side of the Ottawa River, at the points where the Gatineau from the north, and the Rideau from the south reach its waters, are wonderfully endowed by nature. The strange horizontal stratas of grey rocks overhanging its south shore, its bushy banks, the foaming falls of the Rideau River, and the Gatineau rapids on the opposite shore, seem to conspire to make this nature spot an unforgettable

> composition, the rugged charm of which grips the onlooker and carries him back, in spite of the close proximity of the city, into a past seemingly filled with the calls of the early guides and the gleam of the campfires (Gréber 1950, 122). [7]

Gréber's capital image relied on the curation of a distinct, Canadian, aesthetic informed by the country's natural beauty. What stands in the way of this aesthetic is the litter of industry.

In their Master's thesis titled "Forests For The People: Resisting Neoliberalism Through Permaculture Design", Chris Bisson (2013) argues that during those first fifty years of centralized urban planning in Ottawa a shift of power occurred "from a class of industrial capitalists to the colonial nationalism of a Canadian nation-state" (Bisson 2013, 78). The colonization of the Ottawa Valley for lumber extraction can be understood as "the first phase in the development of Ottawa as a city" (Bisson 2013, 72) and "the lumber industry's domination of Ottawa was the first movement in an ideological dialectic that takes place between liberalism and nationalism that has shaped the urban environment of Ottawa" (Bisson 2013, 70). Although the timber and related industries were constitutive of Ottawa's trajectory, when it came time to create a Capital City, this industrial coupling needed to be undone. How is one meant to charmed, to be gripped by nature and carried back to a time "filled with the calls of the early guides and the gleam of the campfires" (Gréber 1950, 122), i.e. a time *before* the land was settled, with the detritus of industry hanging about? In service to this plan, the bodies and dwellings of several generations of residents would need to be moved from shores of the Ottawa River. As Richardson states in his book, *The Art of Environmental Art: Governing with Aesthetics* (2019),

[7] The area that Gréber is describing is composed of the Rockcliffe Park and New Edinburgh neighborhoods of Ottawa – historically and presently exclusive enclaves for Ottawa's political and elite citizens.

"For working class labourers, a polluting factory provides a source of employment and companionship … while for the affluent and educated such places invite disdain" (Richardson 2019, 5).

Tunney's Pasture

"This morning I visited Shantytown!" So starts an article in *The Ottawa Gazette* written by V.A. Bower on October 26th, 1950, titled "Shanty Town Spells Home To Many; But They Must Go" with the byline, "FDC Taking Over Shore Line Hovels." The article states that "Demand by the FDC and the RCMP to vacate the premises soon is the big problem of the Lanouette family. One reason given is that 'the shack spoils the view from the Champlain Bridge'. At any rate the land is required – sometime – for park purposes" (Ottawa Gazette 1950). Bower describes how their visit felt like travelling to "another world – a rather unpleasant sort of world." They describe the scene before them: about twenty "houses" (their quotations), built from a range of materials – roofing paper, found materials. As they walk along a "rutted and rocky road amid a clump of trees," a rabbit leaps from behind their feet before darting away up the path. The Lanouette family home is described by Bower as "pretentious … actually not a shack at all" but rather a simple framed "home" built with supplies given to Omer Lanouette by his employers, Mahoney and Rich.

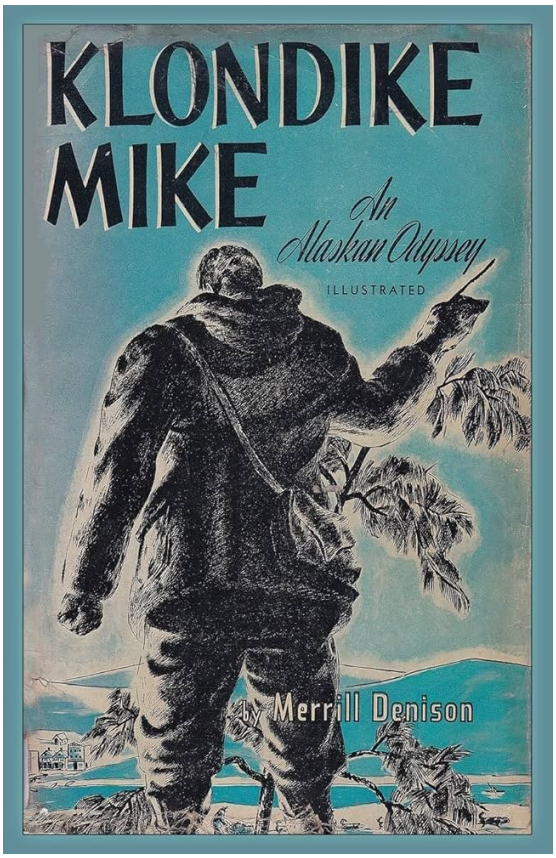


Figure 6: Book cover from Klondike Mike by Merrill Denison, 1943

Michael Ambrose Mahoney aka "Klondike Mike" was a lumber kid, and something of a legend. Born in the "backwoods of Quebec," Mahoney worked in lumber camps in Gatineau and Madawaska as a teenager before heading off to Yukon in 1897, at 21 years old, "with a railway ticket, a suitcase and three dollars" (Allston 2023). Mahoney struck gold at Alaska's Goldstream: "He panned out $165,000 in three months, moved on to Iditarod. There he panned $10,000 a week. When he sold out ($250,000 would be a low estimate, says Mike) and headed back for Quebec, he was only 35, had not a worry in the world" (Time 1948). Apparently not inclined to idle, Mahoney hooked up with his old panning friend, George A. Rich when the two of them were both living in Ottawa in 1914. Mahoney had a hunch that there was money to made in

providing fuel and lumber to the growing community of Westboro, adjacent to the so-called "Shantytown" (near to where Tunney's Pasture is today). His hunch would prove correct.

On December 3rd, 1952, three Mahoney and Rich employees were laying sewer and water mains through Ottawa's aforementioned "Shantytown", also known as "Le Port" (Allston 2018). At that time there were about twenty-five dwellings at Le Port, and a population of over 100 residents, most of them children. In the morning of December 3rd, Mr. and Mrs. Boyer's home caught fire (Evening Citizen 1952, 1). Annette Boyer's husband, Fred, was away at work for the E. Dinelle Wood and Transfer Company on nearby Carruthers Street and Annette was home alone with her two children – Linda, 2 and Oscar, aged 9 months. The fire was said to have started from an overheated stove (the article mentions that Annette had finished cooking her husband's breakfast), which lit up the dwelling like a match. Annette managed to grab baby Linda before running out of the house. A neighbour, Emile Damphousse, heard screaming and ran outside: "I saw Linda in the mother's arms and figured the other kid was still in there. I tried to get close but there was too much heat. I just couldn't make it. I started yelling" (Evening Citizen 1952, 1).

In the meantime, the three Mahoney and Rich employees had heard the mother's cries and saw the smoke coming from the dwelling. They raced over, Roy Joly arriving first: "I smashed in a window with my fist. I saw something huddled in a blanket. It looked like a baby. I started to pull the blanket toward the window, I kept edging the little thing toward the window. The heat was really something. The flames seemed to be bursting up right in my face. I couldn't breathe" (Evening Citizen 1952-a, 1). Another employee, a Mr. Scharfe, took over, bringing the baby to the edge of the window. Scharfe and the third employee, Albert Bond, lifted the

unharmed baby out of the window. Linda, who had been at the centre of the fire, suffered the most. She was brought to the Civic Hospital in critical condition. There is tiny notice on December 4th, that Linda Boyer's condition remained unchanged (Evening Citizen 1952-b, 20). On December 5th, Linda Boyer's obituary appears.

Died

BOYER, Linda—In a local hospital, as the result of burns received when her home burned, on Thursday, December 4, 1952, Linda Boyer, two year old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Boyer, survived by her young brother, Oscar. Resting at W. J. Landreville Funeral Home, 578 Somerset Street West. Libera service will be held on Friday, December 5 at 3 o'clock at St. Francis Church. Interment Notre Dame Cemetery, Ottawa. 35

Figure 7: Source: Evening Citizen 1952-c, 35

Within a couple of years of Linda's death, all of the dwellings at Le Port had been demolished to make way for the Sir John A. MacDonald Parkway (now Kichi Zībī Mīkan) and the Tunney's Pasture government complex – both of which were in keeping with Gréber's plan. Gone were the many Le Port residents who were employed by neighbouring industries, most of which were also on Gréber's chopping block. Some of the families had lived in Le Port for over twenty years: "I guess they were happy. They had never really known any different. I think they were good people" (Allston 2018, in an interview with Le Port descendant Carole Fex-Webster).

The story of Le Port and its eventual demolition reflects shifting spatial perceptions tied to class, economic status and aesthetic representations of the capital city. For instance, the "City Beautiful" movement – which informed federal urban planning schemes, emphasized clean, controlled public spaces. These designs created explicit and implied boundaries that excluded certain communities by relegating them to less visible or less valued areas of the city. For the

FDC, Le Port's residents were not seen as legitimate occupants of the space, despite their longstanding connection to the area. Their homes, built with materials from the residents' employers and community connections, were the product of labouring in nearby industries.

A settlement like Le Port belied the idealized image of a capital city, which allowed for its demolition and the subsequent erasure of the families who lived there. This displacement was justified not just on practical grounds (to make way for infrastructure) but on moral and aesthetic ones as well (for the good of the country). The very existence of the people living in those conditions disrupted the "proper" sensory perception of the space, thus necessitating its transformation. Ottawa's urban planners could only achieve their vision by concealing the lived reality of those living at Le Port. This shift in how space was perceived highlights how aesthetics are not just about beauty, but also power and visibility.

Aesthetics and River House

Urban planning backed by the Federal Government and endowed with statutory power created a novel way of governing the citizens of Ottawa. Dissident voices were equated to poor citizenship and antithetical to the goal of crafting a space for "all Canadians." In a letter published in the Evening Citizen in 1949, Mr. Alphonse Fournier, Liberal Minister of Public Works, took aim at a cohort of individuals who were protesting the relocation of the Federal Printing Bureau – as part of the Gréber Plan to decentralize federal buildings – from the shore of the Ottawa River in Ontario to the shore of the Ottawa River in Quebec, noting "That some local interest, in the process [of moving], may temporarily be inconvenienced is to be expected, but to implement at least in part the development for our proposed National Capital will need the cooperation and good will of all those concerned" (The Evening Citizen 1949).

The OIC was a vanity project for the vice-regal elite, who were candid in sharing their discomfort at being found in a violent, grubby lumbertown, and they had the power and money to change the terrain in their favour. For Gréber, the FDC, and then the NCC, the goal was to craft a Capital City that reflected "every Canadian." The modes for achieving this relied on oscillating attention away from the "aesthetic disfigurement of nature" caused by the very industry that contributed to Ottawa's rise as a city, towards its opposite – an imaginary, deindustrialized space reflective of an entire nation. Today the NCC is the Capital Region's largest landowner and custodian of the "vital public places that are unique to our nation's symbolic, natural and cultural heritage" and they "continuously improve their assets so they remain a legacy for future generations" (National Capital Commission n.d.-c). One of those assets, River House, a 100-year-old boathouse, was completely restored in 2023. Its first tenant is Ottawa Riverkeeper, much to the approval of NCC Chairman Tobi Nussbaum who, at the 2023 Riverkeeper Gala mused, "Who could possibly be a better partner and tenant in this building than the Ottawa Riverkeeper?" (Phillips 2023).

Chapter Three – The Environment

Near the confluence of the Ottawa, Gatineau, and Rideau Rivers, the National Capital Commission's (NCC) River House stands in striking red and white, nestled in the treed escarpment of Rockcliffe Park. Built between 1914 and 1925 as a private boathouse for the Ottawa New Edinburgh Canoe Club (ONECC), in 2010 it was made a Recognized Federal Heritage Building due to "its links to the history of canoeing in Canada, its architectural value as a rare example of early boathouse design, and its remarkable setting on the river" (Parks Canada, n.d.). In the 2018 federal budget, the Government of Canada announced that the NCC would be receiving $55 million to invest in the Commission's major infrastructure projects. Of that investment, $15 million went towards restoring the boathouse to "protect [it] … and make it universally accessible for all Canadians to enjoy year-round" (National Capital Commission n.d.-d). Renamed River House by the NCC, its opening in the summer of 2023 was widely anticipated and enthusiastically embraced.

After a major fundraising campaign and a $750,000 financial commitment from the Government of Canada, Ottawa Riverkeeper was able to enter into a 5-year, renewable lease agreement with the NCC (Brocklehurst 2022). This agreement made it possible for the organization to develop space within River House to include a freshwater science lab, a multi-functional education space, a "conference and collaboration hub", and a designated office space on the river for the organization to work from (Brocklehurst 2022). Where once Ottawa Riverkeeper was confined to the concrete-locked space of a Centretown midrise, the new location promised to provide the organization with direct access to the river. Deemed a new era for watershed protection during Ottawa Riverkeeper's public fundraising phase, River House

was said to be embarking on a process of transformation where it would emerge as a "destination where community members can discover, connect and ultimately, help preserve and protect the Ottawa River and its watershed" (Ottawa Riverkeeper n.d.-c).

During this phase, the organization needed to articulate the work that they do and the context within which they operate. On Ottawa Riverkeeper's fundraising page they describe themselves as being "a trusted community advocate, educator, and convener" and as a "leading advocate for freshwater protection in the region" tasked with "educating the next generation to care for the river" (Ottawa Riverkeeper n.d.-d). They contextualize their work as being carried out amidst a climate crisis marked by "mounting eco-anxiety" and as taking place on a heritage river within the "unceded, unsurrendered Algonquin Anishinaabeg territory in the heart of Canada's National Capital Region" (Ottawa Riverkeeper n.d.-c). The boathouse is anchored near the Gatineau River delta, a traditional summer gathering place and "cultural landscape" (Pilon and Boswell 2015) where the archaeological record shows people have been coming together and exchanging information for at least 4000 to 5000 years.

The goals of Ottawa Riverkeeper at River House are embedded into those of the NCC, whose aim was to restore a structure emblematic of exclusive, middle-class summer recreation and transform it into a space with 'universal access' for all Canadians (National Capital Commission n.d.-d)., in one of Ottawa's most affluent neighbourhoods. Through River House, I engage with both contemporary environmental concerns – felt at different scales and intensities – and the modalities employed to address them. Modes of concern – the ways in which concern is expressed or acted upon – are always relational. Ottawa Riverkeeper and the NCC both name themselves as stewards of the rivers; collective action and advocating for the river are just some

of the ways their concerns are expressed. This chapter also looks at future-oriented concerns as expressed by my interlocutors. Reflecting on fieldwork, I found that the stewarding efforts of Ottawa Riverkeeper and the NCC depend on intergenerational concern and future concerned citizens who will continue to steward the river after this generation is gone. A lot of environmentalism is aimed at protecting the land for future settler use.

I situate this chapter in its historical context by exploring how the boathouse/River House came to be, who it was built for, and how it was spoken about during its so-called "peak" in the first part of the 20th century and as a site for "good citizenship" and national belonging, then and now. Through interviews[8] with current and past Riverkeeper staff, the second half of the chapter explores how their practices of watershed stewardship relate to enduring colonial structures. These practices can reproduce settler imaginaries that govern access and authority over the Ottawa River rather than challenge status-quo logics of land and belonging. Additionally, I show that despite universalizing claims made by the NCC, access to the Ottawa River at River House tracks existing lines of exclusion.

My analysis is informed by scholars who provide a critical lens for approaching environmental stewardship in a settler-colonial context. Following Jerome Whitington (n.d.), I understand the activism that Ottawa Riverkeeper does to be an example of aesthetic didacticism – an aesthetic model of activism which relies on emotional appeals and a moral authority "that continually privileges scientism as a modality of abstract experience of the planetary" (Whitington n.d.) without materially challenging the structures of settler authority or governance. This connects with Max Liboiron's (2021) research on settler science where they[9] emphasize that

[8] I have made the decision to share the interview material as it relayed to me. Presenting their voices more directly in this way is intended to respect the analyses of the interlocutors themselves, and to avoid misrepresenting their ideas.
[9] Liboiron uses they/them pronouns.

collaboration with Indigenous communities does not inherently unsettle colonial land relations, particularly when settler institutions retain control of the terms of engagement. In my analysis, I look at how affectively framed environmental care, like that promoted by Ottawa Riverkeeper and the NCC, sustains versions of caring for the river that can undermine transformative possibilities that achieve the respective organization's articulated goals. While Ottawa Riverkeeper foregrounds pluralist collaboration and community engagement, the organization operates within enduring structures of power tied to Canada's sovereign institutions and colonial beginnings. Government funding, elite patronage, and appeals to the neutrality of science are constituent parts that currently limit civic participation.

River House Part One

The year is 1932 and you are sitting at the table reading a copy of The Ottawa Evening Citizen. A few pages into the second section is a large advertisement for the May Fair, happening that weekend at the Ottawa New Edinburgh Canoe Club (ONECC); "The doors of the white clubhouse by the river – near Rockcliffe Park – are thrown open to the public of Ottawa during the May Fair … You and your friends are cordially invited to come down and spend an enjoyable evening". (Ottawa Evening Citizen, 1932). Like in years past, visitors to the clubhouse would be entertained with cabaret shows, a ten-piece jazz orchestra, entertaining games, "clever Fortune Tellers" and a "Giant Housie-Housie" (a tombola game similar to bingo) (Ottawa Evening Citizen, 1931). Attendees could be entered into a draw to win fifty dollars in government bonds. If you were unable to get to the May Fair by car, a free shuttle service was available to bring visitors from the Buena Vista transit stop (the last on the line) to the boathouse so that they may spend "one of the gayest and liveliest evenings ... that was [their] lot to spend anywhere" (Ottawa Evening Citizen 1935). The true lure of the event, it was said, was the opportunity to

"show your appreciation of the work done by the directors of the club" who have "stood for all that is clean and wholesome in athletics and outdoor sports" by contributing a small fee to help pay off "the heavy debt they have incurred in the rebuilding of the Club House" (Ottawa Evening Citizen 1935).

Designed by architect Colborne Powell Meredith for ONECC in 1914, the impressive boathouse has been a Rockcliffe Park landmark for nearly a century. This location was not the club's first. In 1885, "…realizing that tangible and visible assets might help them by creating an impression of wealth, stability and permanency…" (McCullough 2021, 2), Ottawa Canoe Club's (OCC) members raised $200 to construct their first boathouse – a floating structure moored near the Rideau Canal locks on the Ottawa River. The aforementioned "sawdust situation" of the late 19th century ultimately led the club to look for an alternative location, which it found at Governor's Bay near Rideau Hall. From there, "OCC members stored their canoes, set forth on expeditions to adjacent rivers, raced in regattas, and swam" (Vincent, n.d.). Just before the First World War, the club acquired a water lot from the Ottawa Improvement Commission (OIC), further downstream in a "semi-rural location amongst tall white pines … at the end of a streetcar line connecting it to the downtown" (Vincent, n.d.). It was at that time that the New Edinburgh Canoe Club (NECC) merged with the OCC to form ONECC. The land along the northern shore of Rockcliffe Park was one of several city parks leased to the OIC in 1904, in service to city planner Frederick Todd's vision for a stately drive along the Ottawa River. An example of a "private recreational organization on OIC land", the ONECC boathouse was built "during the OIC's last major initiative in national capital planning" (Parks Canada, n.d.). The boathouse opened its doors in 1923; "It was the roaring '20s, and the boathouse was the place to be in the

city … the ballroom was packed every night. There were bands, regattas, it was a key component of the social life of the city" (Corbett 2002).

Meredith, the boathouse's designer, was a well-known architect who designed many grand homes and other prominent buildings in Ottawa. He was appointed commissioner of the OIC in 1908 by Wilfred Laurier's Liberal Government and was known as a provocateur who "ruffled the feathers" of OIC board members whom he accused of failing to advance the recommendations in Frederick Todd's 1903 preliminary parks plan, including works done at Rockcliffe Park (Gordon 2002, 41). Meredith (1911) was a big proponent of urban planning and published articles in professional journals, impassioning his peers by saying: "Rooted in common sense, and watered by our increasing fountain of knowledge, this [urban planning], the fairest product in our age of progress, is also essentially the most democratic. It will benefit all – from the pauper in the slum to the prince in the palace" (Meredith 1911, 77). He continues, "What is going to be our heritage to posterity? Are we going to shrug our shoulders and say that this is the business of somebody else? I have confidence in the profession that it will rise to the call of opportunity and make the civic life of this Dominion an example to the world in its striving towards the ideal" (Meredith 1911, 81).

This sentiment has contemporary resonance. The NCC's website and their publications reveal an articulated vision of the National Capital Region as a place that represents "the heart of our great nation … the centre of our democracy, and a symbol of the country's collective history, heritage, culture, and natural features" (National Capital Commission. n.d.-b). Additionally, the NCC positions itself as the "long-term planner of federal lands [and] principal steward of nationally significant public places" (National Capital Commission. n.d.-b). These sentiments

illustrate a desired commitment to building and preserving a place that inspires *all* Canadians and reflect the supposed ideals of the nation – not dissimilar to the ethics described by early urban planners such as Meredith. And while the excitement over the NCC's River House and its potential for inspiring cooperative action is embraced, the renovation and reopening also bring to light important considerations about access, inclusivity, and representation.

A critique arises when one considers that the sentiments shared by the NCC can obscure complex historical and cultural tensions. Canadian patriotism is assumed and unifying, *even when* it reinforces dominant power structures. Cultural historian Tricia Cusack (2007), in the introduction for the journal *National Identities*, titled "Riverscapes and the Formation of National Identity" notes that:

> Like all constructs, national identity has to be first built then maintained, and it needs persistent affirmation. The identification and reification of a national river provides assurances of continuity and a vivid image for the national imagination, but it does not do so naturally and much ideological work is performed by and through the riverscape … In the narrative, restoration of an urban riverscape is explicitly tied to the 'remembrance', and therefore restoration, of a particular national history. This history takes the capital city and its landscape as the centre of a moral geography of nation and national belonging (Cusack 2007, 102).

By emphasizing a "collective history, heritage, and culture," the NCC presents a version of Canadian ethics that can identify a colonial history without acknowledging its violence.

River House Part Two

In mid-August 2022, before the restorations at River House were complete, I received a text message from Julia saying that her and her team would be meeting at River House the next day for a "brainstorming design session." That day was the first time I had seen the boathouse – brightly painted in red and white, seemingly floating above the Ottawa River, its steel stilts blending into the dark ripples below. Although it was still a worksite, the hardscaping and landscaping had taken shape, and one could visualize how the space might look in a few months' time. Members of Julia's team – four young adults – began to arrive and we gathered on the edge of the escarpment, meters above the suspended walkway that would give us access to the building. Shortly thereafter, the site manager met us and handed-out our safety equipment – high visibility vests, hard hats, and steel-toed inserts for us to put over our boots. Once we entered the building, we made a quick tour of the space. We discussed the sympathetic treatment River House had received – its particular paints and restored brass hardware, used in keeping with its heritage status. We ascended and descended indoor and outdoor stairways and meandered around the two wrap-around porches. Julia guided our visualization of where the various labs, offices, and workspaces would be.

We took in other aspects of the building as well, including the landscaping – the consensus being that the shoreline looked "unnatural" and needed more riparian vegetation – and the "universally accessible" swimming area that would be managed by the NCC. We discussed collectively how universal access could be interpreted otherwise, considering that there is no public transit to the site and that car parking nearest to the boathouse is minimal. One member of

the team mentioned how nearby neighbours, who have houses around the eponymous McKay Lake, might be happy to have "less outsiders" using the lake in summer – prompting another member of staff to respond sarcastically with, "You gotta keep the riff-raff outta' Rockliffe!".

Imagine it is 2023 and you are sitting at a table reading the social section of the Ottawa Business Journal when you come across an article all about the Riverkeeper Gala that was held the week prior. The article highlights how the evening "offered up everything, from food and drink stations, to live music and dancing, to auction bidding, conversation and stylish décor" (Phillips 2023). It describes a balmy summer night filled with live music and entertainment where "river lovers" came together to financially support the work of Ottawa Riverkeeper in keeping the river "swimmable, drinkable and fishable for everyone" (Ottawa Riverkeeper n.d.-a). The article resembles past accounts of the annual gala wherein commentators describe the event as "one of the most popular and social fundraisers of the spring season" (Phillips 2022), "one of the most talked about events on the Ottawa social calendar" (Phillips 2022), "a hot ticket in political Ottawa" (Lapointe 2023), and as "the best party in town, right on the shores of the river" (Green 2022). This article, like the earlier one from 1923, starts by drawing attention to the beautiful boathouse venue and its proximity to water before moving on to the decorations, the entertainment, the attendees. The goal of these events – both in 1923 and 2023 – was to raise funds for their organizations and their strategy for doing so was to create aesthetic spaces along the river for Ottawa's elite to mingle and be seen *doing good*.

Ottawa Riverkeeper's move to River House is worth looking at in relation to access and representation. Their mission to engage with watershed communities, as a way to steward and protect the river, often exists at odds with the reality of existing systems of exclusion,

particularly amongst those who are most acutely affected by poor water access. In what follows, I share how my interlocutors are engaging with those concerns while participating in their roles. Ottawa Riverkeeper is a multi-disciplinary team whose members are, at any one time, working on dozens of different projects that are turned towards a stated goal "to protect, promote and improve" the Ottawa River Watershed's "ecological health and future" (Ottawa Riverkeepers, n.d.). How these different forms of stewardship relate to each other, and how the actors performing them relate to their projects is in an ongoing ethical process. My interlocutors describe feelings of tension, even guilt, when they discuss their ability to care for the river within a contemporary settler-colonial context and they touch on the complexities of branding and leadership within a historically white-led institution. This is done with the acknowledgment that the growth and evolution of the organization should be steered toward becoming more inclusive. My analysis attends to the ethical forms of understanding that undergird my interlocutor's environmental practices.

A Waterkeeper Model

The Waterkeeper movement began in 1966 on the Hudson River in Crotonville, New York when a "blue collar coalition of commercial and recreational fishermen mobilized to reclaim the river from polluters … The people that lived there in 1966 were not your prototypical, affluent environmentalists. They had little expectation of ever seeing Yosemite or our national parks. The environment was their backyard: The bathing beaches, the swimming holes, the fishing holes on the Hudson" (The Sabin Center for Environment and Sustainability 2011, in an interview with Robert F. Kennedy Jr., co-founder of the Waterkeeper Alliance). In 1984, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. was hired by the Hudson River Fishermen's Association – which later became the first Riverkeeper – to be the association's prosecuting attorney. Kennedy would

go on to co-found the Waterkeeper Alliance (of which Riverkeeper is a part of) in 1983, of which he was president until stepping down in 2020.[10] As of 2024, there are 307 Waterkeeper groups in 47 countries that "patrol and protect nearly six million square miles of watersheds on six continents" (Waterkeeper, 2024).

Ottawa Riverkeeper

While studying law at the University of Ottawa, former Ottawa City Councillor George Brown wrote a research paper that asked the question, "Who is watching out for the Ottawa River?" (2000). The paper discussed the harmful practices that were affecting the river's health such as the development of infrastructure (dams), pollution from chemical and nuclear waste, and agricultural runoff containing fertilizers and pesticides (Brown 2000, 1). Brown also drew attention to the region's history of unsustainable resource extraction, including overlogging, which depleted forests and contributed to sedimentation in the river (Brown 2000, 5).

Brown advocated for the Ottawa River to be officially recognized as a Heritage River, based on criteria related to natural heritage, cultural, and recreational values. While Brown asserted that recognition by the Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS) would be valuable for stewarding efforts, at that time the Government of Quebec was reluctant to be involved in federal programs that celebrated Canadian Heritage (Brown 2000, 22)

In 2016, the 590 km Ontario portion of the Ottawa River, from Lake Temiskaming to East Hawkesbury, was designated as a Canadian Heritage River for its cultural heritage value. Its designation recognized the river for being he cultural heartland of the Algonquin people" and for

[10] It is worth noting the irony embedded in the origins of the Waterkeeper Alliance, given the contemporary political stance of one of its founders, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. When Kennedy co-founded the Alliance in the early 1980s, he was a leading figure in a movement grounded in environmental advocacy and grassroots legal action aimed at protecting waterways from pollution. Kennedy's current politics stand in stark contrast to the evidence-based, inclusive environmentalism that characterized the Waterkeeper's beginnings.

"its role as an important travel route for explorers and the fur trade ... its industrial use for logging and hydro development" and for its importance in "the development of Canada and the choice of Ottawa as the national capital" (Canadian Heritage Rivers System. n.d.). Meredith Brown of Ottawa Riverkeeper welcomed the designation, saying at the time, "People protect what they love, so developing this sense of pride around the river is very important for inspiring people to protect it" (Pope 2016).

In 2017, the Government of Quebec recognized the Quebec portion of the Ottawa River as a historic site under Quebec's Cultural Heritage Act. Parks Canada released a statement in 2017 stating, "The heritage designation of the whole Ottawa River will enhance our collective sense of river pride and inspire people in Quebec and Ontario to respect and protect the river that flows through their communities" (Parks Canada 2017). Catherine McKenna, at that time MP for Ottawa Centre and the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change for the federal government, thanked both provincial governments "for their commitment to working with the federal government to ensure the long-term health and future of our important and magnificent river" (Water Canada 2017).

Brown's findings in 2000 revealed that at that time, existing organizations and regulations were insufficient to protect the river's health. Disparate organizations lacked the scope and power to address the broader, cumulative impacts on the river's ecosystem. Brown proposed the Waterkeeper Stewardship Model, which relied on a full-time advocate – the Waterkeeper – a "vigilant" individual whose mission was to protect the ecological health of a waterway, independent of politics and outside interests (Water Canada 2017, 22-23). This model, Brown argued, could provide the oversight and advocacy needed to protect the Ottawa River (Water

Canada 2017, 23). Brown shared the Waterkeeper model with local environmental groups, and soon teamed up with Dan Brunton, a lifelong ecologist, to build support for the concept. They met with other environmental advocates, gathered feedback, and refined the idea (Brocklehurst 2021). In March 2001, John Almstedt and Parham Momtahan joined the effort, offering their expertise in community engagement and organization (Brocklehurst 2021). On April 28, 2001, they held a community meeting at Lakeside Gardens in the Britannia neighbourhood of Ottawa that was attended by over 100 people. This event is said to have marked the turning point for the initiative, and Ottawa Riverkeeper was officially formed that year.

Ottawa Riverkeeper

We are searching for a dynamic, passionate and highly motivated individual to help us build a strong ecological voice for the Ottawa River.

Ottawa Riverkeeper is a brand new initiative, an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to facilitating maintenance and enhancement of the river's ecological integrity through monitoring, original research, public and agency communications and enforcement. **Ottawa Riverkeeper** works independently as well as co-operatively with individuals, businesses, community groups and all levels of government on both sides of the river.

The organization is looking to hire its first fulltime **Riverkeeper** to commence work in January 2003. Interested applicants should possess:

- University degree and experience related to environmental issues
- Proven written and oral skills in French and English
- Strong communication skills
- Good organizational skills and self-motivation
- Basic knowledge of the Ottawa River and surrounding communities is an asset
- Physically fit and prepared to work in the outdoors

See www.ottawariver.ca for a detailed job description.

Please forward your resume by 3:00 P.M. EST, 20 November 2002 to **ottawariverkeeper@rogers.com** or by mail to: Ottawa Riverkeeper/Sentinelles de la rivière des Outaouais, 216 Lincoln Heights Road, Ottawa, Ontario. K2B 8A8

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Figure 8: Source: Ottawa Citizen 2002, 69.

Under the umbrella of the Waterkeeper Alliance, Ottawa Riverkeeper aims to empower local communities to not only be stewards but also to act as watchdogs, ensuring that the Ottawa River is treated with respect and responsibility. Riverkeepers – an official title within the organization – act as public representatives, holding governments and industries accountable for their impact on the rivers, and engaging citizens to monitor, report violations, and advocate for better protection. Laura Reinsborough is the current CEO of Ottawa Riverkeeper, and as such holds the title of *the* Ottawa Riverkeeper. She came into the position in 2021 (Ottawa Riverkeeper n.d.-b).

It was under Laura's stewardship that Ottawa Riverkeeper entered into the agreement with NCC, allowing the move into the new space at River House. I was able to meet with Laura ahead of the move to discuss, among other things, her thoughts on the new space and her role within it. Laura viewed the move as an exciting opportunity, saying:

> It has been years that Riverkeeper has been trying to think of a location that we can program out of, have your own space – not just for offices – but for programming. The idea was always that it had to be close to the water. [At River House] there is this huge opportunity for the organization. There's just so much more potential for our work in science and education and advocacy by having our own space – by having such an iconic site on the river – it's just very exciting what we can do there. I think the piece I'm most excited about is that we can convene people there, because our mission is to inspire cooperative action. Having a space to convene people, a space that is so – you just cannot

> deny the river when you are in that site. I think it's the biggest potential that we will unlock.

Laura had only been the Ottawa Riverkeeper for a year when I met her. She shared, "This is very nascent for me, very much in progress, because I did not set out to 'become the Riverkeeper!' but this opportunity came my way, and I've jumped in." Laura and I had spoken earlier on in my fieldwork about the title "Riverkeeper" and its complex meanings relating to environmental stewardship in the Capital Region. Laura told me:

> With our move to River House we're taking this opportunity to reflect on our branding and how we represent ourselves in a more public facing way. This tension [relating to the title Riverkeeper] – I've been sitting with this tension since recruitment, and to me it's fraught with problems. It's like a repeat of the Doctrine of Discovery[11] – 'Oh is there no river keeper here? I do declare!' I think I'm being very casual about that, but I'm using

[11] In 1452 Pope Nicholas V issued a papal bull called the Dum Diversas (wild different) – that gave European kings "full and free permission to invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens [Muslims] and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be … and to reduce their persons into perpetual servitude" (Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice 2021, 55). In 1455 the Pope issued another bull, the Romanus Pontifex, which gave "all Christian kings" the right to claim land that was deemed vacant for their nation. The "Doctrine of Discovery" was an interpretation of these bulls and used by European colonizers in order to stake claim to terra nullius (vacant land) (Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice 2021, 55). Land was considered terra nullius if it had not been occupied by Christians, a belief that invalidated the sovereignty of Indigenous nations: "Europe had issued a declaration of war on the world with the unleashing of an unprecedented wave of terror. That is where our [Canada's] history begins" (Manuel, in Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice 2021, 55)

> humour to get through that discomfort of it. In our context, coming in fairly fresh, what I see is a white-led organization while the watershed almost exactly lines up with Algonquin territory. There is amazing work that the organization is doing and developing and stewarding relationships – especially scientific monitoring work that we monitor with Pikwakanagan [at Golden Lake] and Kitigan Zibi – and yet it's more than that. How might we come apart to allow for a new forming? I say that not because we have plans in the works but because I'm open to what needs to break or come apart in order to see a more just version of Ottawa Riverkeeper come into shape.

The name Riverkeeper was contentious. During an interview with Julia, I asked what she thought of the term, to which she responded:

> I mean the issue is, who is the voice of the river? We claim, we write as an organization, that we are the voice for the river, but we know there are many, many voices. As settlers, the voices of the people whose unceded territory we are on – we acknowledge certain things, but that voice isn't being amplified through our work. We try but who are we to have that title? It's an international organization – the Waterkeeper Alliance – so it kind of limits what you can do, though I do know that internally this conversation happens.

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Hannah as well shared that she had trouble reconciling with the authority bestowed on her:

> Who am I to kind of come in here and say 'Look at me! I'm keeping the river!' when it's just that the ability to do that has been vested in me through these existing institutions that have questionable authority over the watershed? I don't know. I think it's also interesting how a lot of the things that put us in the position where we are able to be "river keepers" has nothing to do, really, with being able to keep the river – it has to do with a certain level of inaccessibility for other people. We're the foremost voices for the Ottawa River because we have these connections to people of authority and different levels of government – even a certain amount of authority is being conferred on us through this perceived education and expertise and knowledge that is not very accessible to a lot of people. I think that there's a lot to be said for the importance of experts but there's a lot of other forms of expertise that we're not recognizing, and other forms of experience that are not valued to the same extent.

My interlocutors expressed that there is also a concern relating to how knowledge is shared at different scales among communities; the power to speak for the river is framed as being tied to systems that limit who can participate in decision-making and advocacy. Hannah also shared that access was something that concerned her:

> Just in terms of all the people that have a huge stake in the river – there are people who don't have the time, or the security or connections to be active participants and do advocacy around the river. They may not even know where to find the information they need. That's something I worry about – all the people who are not at the table, who we are not even hearing about. We may not even be cognizant about it – it is easy when you're in a position of privilege to just forget that there are other people who don't have the same access that you do. It's something that has been bothering me a lot.

Julia shared in this discomfort, saying, "Our mandate is that you protect what you love but at the same time what are the barriers to acting on what you love? Why can't you even have access to build a relationship? There's always a political element to it." Julia contextualized these concerns within Ottawa Riverkeeper's move to River House: "And now we're moving to the new location which doesn't have public transit access and it's a building that was built for white privilege. How do we integrate that when we don't represent those community priorities? That's not going to come naturally. Until it's somebody's make-or-break issue, those things can slide."

My interlocutors also mentioned a disconnect between disruptive activism and the ability to act within an organization that stresses consensus as a goal. Julia shared that "there's a lot of harmony in the organization but that's because of the homogeneity of the team, right? We are not ready for conflict because we maintain such a kind of status quo within the organization." Hannah described feeling anxious during a Youth Water Leader workshop on environmental justice where the invited speaker discussed how to organize a protest:

> I had to be like, 'Ottawa Riverkeeper is not telling you to get arrested!' [At the same time] people are personally affected by environmental issues, and they act because they need to. It is not enough sometimes to have passive or apolitical politics … Environmental justice is inherently political and the fact that I can choose what kind of activism I participate in is huge – a lot of people cannot.

In an article titled "The Solidarity of Concern" (2019), Julia Eckert explores the concept of solidarity and its transformative potential in society. For Eckert, solidarity is not just a personal choice but a relational response to our interconnected existence, which calls for a collective response to shared concerns. While my interlocutors recognize a need to work collaboratively for the health of the river, they can act on those concerns and still not be working in solidarity. When Julia or Hannah says that there is a lot of consensus in the organization, they are not equating consensus with solidarity. Answering in the affirmative to a question such as "have we reached a consensus?" can be interpreted as a tacit recognition of moving on from an issue at hand *and* as a method of working together towards an organization's shared goal.

Bureaucratic restraints were also a source of tension mentioned by my interlocutors. Funding requirements such as applying for government grants necessitate specific reporting and accountability, which often leads to frustration about how little time is available for actual activism. Julia shared that it felt like she spent "95% of [her] time doing administrative work by my computer that's not related to any kind of education other than keeping the machine running. I feel frustrated. I feel further and further removed from the actual relation building." The bureaucratic parameters within which Ottawa Riverkeeper operates also maintain a status quo, as

funding often comes with strings attached that shape the scope and limits of the work being done. These associations, while granting certain legitimacy and resources, can inadvertently undermine the very activism that Ottawa Riverkeeper aims to promote by restricting their ability to engage in political resistance or disruptive action on their own and with others.

Individuals who have the time, security, and resources to engage in activism or to access knowledge about the river are more likely to be involved in shaping the discourse. Additionally, elite groups typically have the resources and various forms of capital to engage in fundraising activities such as attendance at the Riverkeeper Gala and golf tournaments. In this way, the Riverkeeper model may unintentionally prioritize wealthier, more influential communities that have greater access to decision-making, funding, and the river itself.

At the public announcement for Ottawa Riverkeeper's fundraiser, the Big River Give, in June of 2024, Geoffe Green, chair emeritus at Ottawa Riverkeeper, said plainly, "We want people to 'give to the riv' ... For all of us who depend on and love this river, we really want people to step up for this cause. We need to spread the word" (Phillips 2024). Laura Reinsborough said of the evening, "Yes, it's an announcement, but it's also a celebration, an invitation and call to action" before saying to the crowd, "We're asking you to join us by making a special gift to ensure the success of this campaign, Yes, we've raised $3 million but we have $2 million to go to contribute to programming, to allow that runway for us to have this magic happen, to engage more people here at River House, and to have that ripple effect throughout the whole watershed" (Phillips 2024).

As Ottawa Riverkeeper expands their public presence through River House, gala events, volunteer programs and citizen science, they participate in a broader process of rendering the

Ottawa River a site for virtuous action. Although at first there may seem to be a lot of overlap between anticolonialism and environmentalism – a common concern for "healthy" land – a deeper analysis reveals that "Environmentalism does not usually address colonialism and usually reproduces it" (Liboiron 2021, 11). Unchecked, the objectives of settler-led environmental causes can maintain the status quo *through* the protection of land: "The future is reserved for settler goals, colonized in advance. The landscape cannot support other relations, activities, or futures that might interfere with future use" (Liboiron 2021, 65).

The designation of the Ottawa River as a Canadian Heritage River is an example of how land can be reanimated through settler memory and institutional heritage. While the designation recognizes Indigenous presence, that recognition is folded into a form of reconciliatory nationalism. The river becomes a symbol of cultural pride and ecological unity, even as it rests on histories of dispossession and land theft. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) argues, the Canadian state will often seek reconciliation without restitution (Simpson 2017, 42). For organizations like the NCC and Ottawa Riverkeeper, stewardship is often framed in terms of protecting land "for future generations," a temporal ethic grounded in legacy and national continuity. A critique arises when this orientation is looked at as a form of "settler futurity" (Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernandez 2013), a structure that forecloses Indigenous sovereignty in the name of national belonging. This informs a future that may welcome collaboration but only insofar as it does not fundamentally alter settler claims to land: "Anything that seeks to recuperate and not interrupt settler colonialism, to reform the settlement and incorporate Indigenous peoples into the multicultural settler colonial nation state is fettered to settler futurity" (Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernandez 2013, 80).

Mud Lake

One morning in early June, the Youth Water Leaders and I met at Mud Lake Conservation area, a protected wetland and deciduous swamp forest along the Ottawa River, to recover a clutch of turtle eggs from a nest buried under lawn of the Britannia Water Filtration Plant. Leading this operation was David Seburn, a turtle specialist with the Canadian Wildlife Foundation, whom Hannah had volunteered with the year before. Dave had been called to remove the nest by a member of the filtration plant staff who had noticed it in an area that was due to be reseeded with grass. As a group, we moved to an area marked by a "nest protector" – a simple wooden frame that was wrapped in chicken wire. On one side of the frame – the side facing the closest water source – was a small opening that was large enough for a turtle to exit but small enough that no predators could enter.

Dave told us how he could read the mother's delivery position in the soil by looking at the markings, which helped him know where to find the buried eggs. Crouched over the nest, Dave began "digging" the soil with the tip of his index finger. After a few minutes Dave exclaimed, "Aha! The ground has got a bit softer." Dave continued to dig gently around the contours of the clutch, carefully wiping away the soil that was surrounding the eggs. As he started removing eggs from the clutch, he reminded Hannah, who had been asked to mark the eggs with a pencil, to be careful to keep the eggs upright as he passed them to her, so the delicate embryos would not detach.

Dave told us that to handle the eggs – to be responsible for the egg – you had to have experience. Each egg that Dave recovered was slowly and gently passed from his hands into Hannah's, from Hannah's hands into a bed of moistened vermiculite. In total, twenty-five eggs

were recovered from the nest, detached from the clutch, marked with an X, and placed in a plastic bin from the dollar store. From there they would rely on human interventions until they were returned to Mud Lake. Someone from the group asked Dave if he was sure that the nest was empty. He was very confident that it was – “I have been doing this for decades”. He then filled the cavity back in with soil so no one would trip.

Dave’s knowledge about turtle nest recovery came from decades of experience. He knew how to read soil, and his fingertips were familiar with the contours of an egg clutch. His practices were embodied. He was able to pass on that knowledge to Hannah, who had learned the correct way to handle a turtle embryo and the appropriate amount of pressure a pencil tip should have on a soft eggshell. When we were later invited back to Mud Lake to release the hatchlings into the water, minuscule snapping turtles were put in our hands and we were instructed to crouch down over the water, submerge our hands below the surface, and allow the hatchlings to swim away.

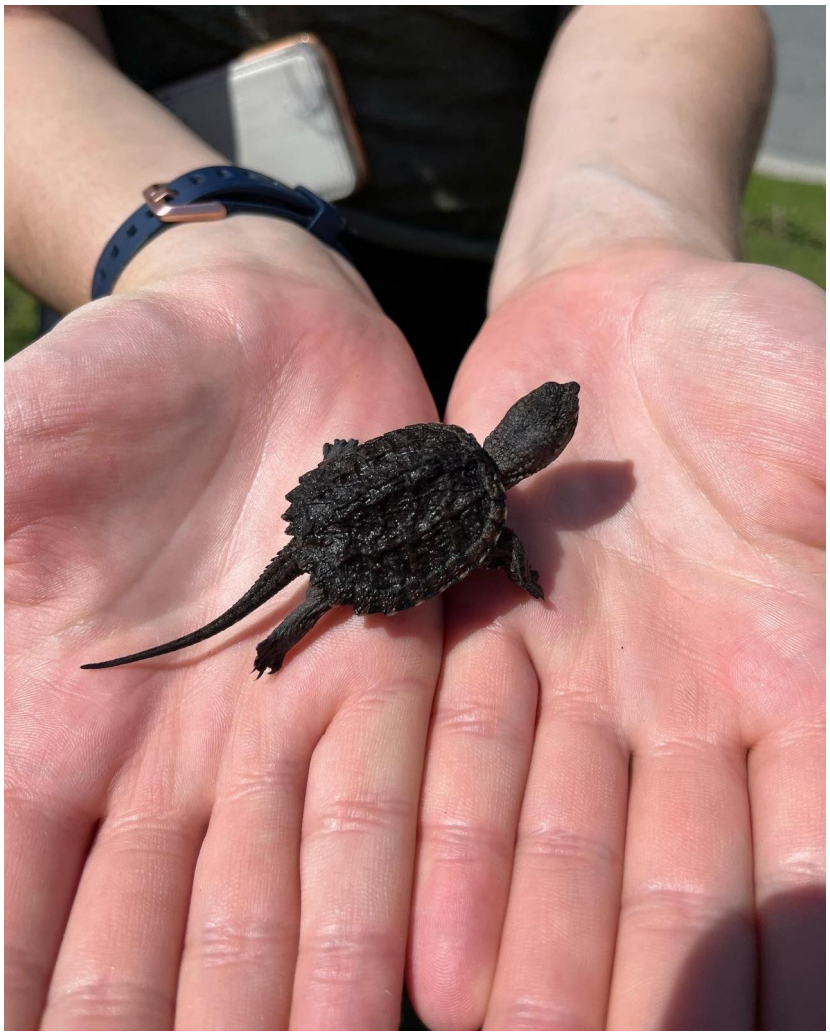

Figure 9: Personal photograph of a baby snapping turtle

It was during that summer that I had a discussion with Hannah about how it felt to be engaged in stewardship with the river. Her response was to say that she felt like "a teeny tiny little speck in the history of the river" and that she had "a hard time not falling into nihilism" when thinking of herself in relation to the "bigger picture" of protecting the river. I then asked what it felt like to hold the turtle eggs in her hands and to move in a way that anticipated a turtle's future:

It's really hard to know your own impact, and I also believe that each individual has such a limited capacity to affect very much change with respect to the river. It's something that I hope we can do as a collective, and so to some extent it feels better for me to do it, because I feel like everybody should be doing it. If I'm not doing it then I'm not really living my values, although I know that my impact is probably really small. I have no idea how many of those hatchlings are going to survive. Probably not very many, unfortunately.

I've seen hatchlings eaten by bull frogs just moments after I've released them into the pond, but I hope that I'm getting us just like infinitesimally closer to where we need to be, and that if everybody else did it, we'd be in a better place. So, I am putting myself in a position to show others 'Yeah, you can do something, and if we all do something together, then it will be a bit better and it's really important that we all pitch in, because just any one of us doing this is probably not going to be enough.'

While this watershed is really big, and there are so many issues and conflicting perspectives that are always working against you, as an individual you have a lot of power to bring others into the circle of people who care, and who are willing to do something to help sustain this watershed for all people and for all species. I know I feel a lot more powerful and better about the state of the world when I'm connecting with other people. Climate change is really stressful, pollution is really stressful, the flooding that we're experiencing is really, really stressful. But there's a lot of other people right here that care, and they want to bring other people on who care as well and they're willing to

> go through all this trouble to learn about these issues in a really deep, profound, and complex way, and figure out what they can do to help out.

Hannah and Dave's careful handling of the turtle eggs, the focus on returning them to their natural habitat after human intervention, and Hannah's emphasis on collective action – "if we all do something together, it will be a bit better" – speaks to both the fragility of ecosystems and the resilience found in small, deliberate acts of shared stewardship. Katy, formerly a biologist at Ottawa Riverkeeper who now works for Nature Canada, shared with me her hope that:

> More people will begin to see the interconnected nature of the environment and how the effects of their actions impact the river. For example, excessive road salt use is an issue in many urban parts of the watershed, including Ottawa, that has wide ranging impacts on the health of many animal groups (i.e., insects fish, amphibians, etc.), plants and overall ecological health. While one may not care about dragonfly larvae, they may care about being able to fish for species that eat these bugs and declines in their populations or health will have downstream impacts on other species, including humans. Taking actions to decolonize environmental work is, in my opinion, one way that we can start to see these changes as we move away from the more Western viewpoint that sees the environment as something that we can take from as opposed to something that we are a part of.

Katy's last point was informed by the book *Listening to Indigenous Voices* (Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice 2021) which emphasizes the difference between understanding nature as something that we belong to – an interconnected part of our identity and existence – and viewing it merely as a collection of belongings, or resources, that can be owned, extracted, or exploited.

By emphasizing relations, Hannah and Katy articulate a form of resilience that is rooted in community rather than individual responsibility. This collective action is both a source of hope and a response to the feeling of individual responsibility in the face of environmental degradation. Eckert (2019) proposes that solidarity can arise from an acknowledgment of connection, even when experiences are vastly different. It is through this recognition of being implicated in one another's struggles, despite differences, that solidarity is formed. This inclusive form of solidarity transcends consensus and focuses on the shared need for justice and change.

Conclusion

In a settler colonial context, ecological concern for the river and its environment is compounded by an awareness of the historical and ongoing injustices levied against Indigenous communities, whose lands and resources have been exploited, often at the expense of the very ecosystems that settlers now attempt to protect. As I have shared, there is an acknowledged tension in these efforts, as settlers (which my interlocutors identify as) often find themselves caught between trying to rectify past harms and the reality of their continued involvement in the colonial project. In *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada* (2015), Lowman and Barker identify various settler reactions to being "discomforted in the process of confronting how much and how profoundly our lives are structured by colonialism" (Lowman and Barker 2015, 90). On the one hand they provide examples and analysis of "moves to comfort," where

settlers act to resolve their feeling of discomfort, for example by singling themselves out as exceptional, or by providing settler society solutions to problems caused to Indigenous people (Lowman and Barker 2015, 99-100). On the other hand, they advocate "going further into situations and conversations that are unsettling" as a "strategy because it helps identify points of contention in our lives where settler colonialism exerts pressure on us through our particular, personal vulnerabilities" (Lowman and Barker 2015, 105). Crediting Paulette Regan for the inspiring this idea, the authors point out that discomfort "can work as a compass, pointing away from settler colonial security" (Lowman and Barker 2015, 106).

The tension between environmentalism, access, and representation is lively at Ottawa Riverkeeper and recognized by my interlocutors who work for this organization. Settler concern for the Ottawa River has been, and continues to be, intertwined with sovereignty, aesthetics, and imagined futures. While concerns have been presented as being for the common good, and in the interest of all Canadians, in practice they are often shaped by power structures, elite interests, and colonial institutions. In the context of Ottawa, future anti-colonial research into the relationship between the NCC, the watershed, and the city itself could address the ambiguities and tensions that remain.

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