Knowings and Knots

Methodologies and Ecologies in Research-Creation

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Contents

Dialogues

"Dear Simon..."

Letters back and forth, between Simon Pope, Glen Lowry, and Rachelle Viader Knowles on Creative Practice-Led Research

In lieu of an interview, this written exchange between Simon Pope, Glen Lowry, and Rachelle Viader Knowles presents an extended dialogue about creative practice-led research across its various political and institutional contexts. This multivocal, multisite writing and thinking connects the Toronto Islands; Dale i Sunnfjord, Norway; Coventry, UK; the Algonquin Highlands, Ontario; and Roma, Italy, in a network of reflexive correspondence.

LOWRY TO POPE, JULY 19, 2018

Dear Simon,

I hope this letter finds you well—comfortably cool and refreshed. I'm sorry it has taken me so long to write. I have been thinking, fondly, about our ranging conversations, and wanting to return to the discussion that grew out of our perambulation around Ward's Island—the rambling tour you so kindly facilitated.

We promised to carry forward the dialogue started on the island through an exchange of letters. In lieu of a recorded and transcribed interview (the gold standard of qualitative enquiry), we thought something more open-ended might better serve to our shared interests. We

agreed that an exchange of letters might fit both our philosophical concerns and methodological leanings; while responding to our immediate publication goals (this volume), letters allow us to look forward to other creative outcomes.

With this exchange—which it dawns on me is really two very different types of exchange (past: embodied conversation; present: epistolary commitment)—in mind, I've been going through the various day-to-day events and responsibilities that constitute/punctuate an academic life, taking notes, and formulating different written approaches. Like a talisman, I've been carrying the question of form and focus around with me for weeks. How to move from our walking and talking into writing?

So, it was strange to reconnect through email earlier this week and to read that you and the family have left the city. Summer in Norway sounds like a great option. A perfect way to escape the Southern Ontario heat and humidity while taking advantage of a radical change of geographic perspective. Oddly, your shift in landscapes/focus parallels my own trajectory out of the city. For much of the last month, I was at the cottage "up north," which is really only a few hours outside Toronto and still firmly within Southern Ontario, a long way from Northern Ontario. In any case, I spent time on the dock, looking out across the lake, and thinking about writing to you or what I might say. I have wanted to delve into the immediacy of my family history and the materiality of migration and settlement. Being at the cottage, I thought I might find detailed tropes and imagery that might help better frame a much larger discussion of institutionalized research and land-based knowledge systems.

Sifting through observations of the trees and wildlife, tuned to the industrial history subsumed by the forests and lakes of the Algonquin Highlands, I've been trying to wrap my head around the role of creative practice/creative practitioners play in the construction of knowledge—what our research offices might call knowledge production, knowledge translation, or knowledge mobilization.

When I read your email, it reminded of how distant geographies can be seen together. I remember reading that the Finns, Norwegians, Danes, Swedes, Icelanders, and others have traditionally felt at home in the forest of Ontario. The lakes and rocks of the Precambrian shield resonate with the familiar rocky climes of Scandinavia, or so the story goes. As I rehearse this, I am left to wonder how this idea might boil down to wishful thinking, not my own per se but an inherited series of aspirational narratives. When I recall Algonquin Park, there is a tendency to imagine a pristine wildness, and to forget the park's prehistory as a massive tract of industrial resource extraction. And what of the stoic Northern European woodsmen and their nearly Indigenous bond to this land? To some extent, I am recirculating a nationalist discourse, complete with buried references to Tom Thomson, the Group of Seven, or other exemplars of a rugged Canadian nationalism.

But what of the urban infrastructures that both enable the popular myths, art historical or otherwise? How can we work to dislodge an ideological discomfort with the histories of labour, industry, and capital, or the violent policing of race, gender, and sexual identities that continue to naturalize an Anglo-dominant? Not only the universities we work around and for, or the institutional expectations that prefigure our discourse. But, also, me sitting on the dock. You and I walking around Ward's Island, surveying flood damage.

My line of thinking here builds on our discussions about relations among Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples and treaty relations—the Toronto Purchase. Our questions about how the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada will or does impact the way we work and the institutional structures we invoke as we do. With my ears and eyes turned to the comforts of a colonial history that returns us here, or, more to the point, me here and you there. For my own part, I am keen to listen for whatever inflections that still reverberate with each naming of a way through this small section of Southern Ontario. I am curious about unsettling my own knowledge of a geography cut through by historical trade routes—the Bobcaygeon Rd., Settlement Lake,

Saskatchewan Lake Road, Buckslide Rd. These and other not quite so famous highways and byways still bear witness to the historical routes followed by generations. I'm speaking here of the hunters, trappers, and loggers—company men/adventurers of empire and the First Nations and Métis willing to lead them through the land and their offspring: the lawyers, marketing and communications specialists, teachers, bureaucrats, researchers, doctors, and others who pilot their SUVs back and forth from city to country.

With each passing summer, the main roads—Highway 35, Highway 60, Highway 11, Highway 117—are widened, straightened, and levelled as crews cut into the forest of pine, hemlock, spruce, birch, and maple. Each year, we blast deeper into the granite of Precambrian shield; the roads are paved and repaved, power lines upgraded and restrung. Ostensibly, the upgrades make our passage through smoother, faster. But I remember, too, the hours spent on Highway 17, outside Espanola, while Idle No More closed the road in protest, during the "Summer We Danced," as Leanne Simpson's recent book puts it. Stopped dead in my tracks, it was hard to ignore the hubris of this nation's striated geography and pretense of smooth sailing. I was unsettled.

Inchoate Road: What comes first—the idea of a footpath or paved highway? I am troubled by definition, the slippage of origins, of intentionality or purpose. Are these newly paved highways—shiny, smooth—really capable of getting us where we need to go? Rather than the old road or path that set out a desire for the newer road, flatter, straighter, faster, maybe we have had it backwards. The highway really seeks to initiate the walking path, a faint desire line the logical projection of an eight-lane freeway? When did river give way to rail? Is freight inevitably valued in terms of positive return on investment, bigger boats, barges, cars, or trucks? Inchoate for whom? When we step away, and turn to look back at the troubling assumptions that have underwritten much that is culture or history, it is difficult not to be unsettled by scale. I find myself thinking about how wanting more needs to begin by asking for less.

Along the highway, the abandoned businesses and service stations narrate this strange tension. They describe sad landscapes of over-reaching capacity—more speed and greater distances. The more fuel efficient our vehicles become, the larger their gas tanks are, the less we need to stop. There is really no need to pull over and get out of the car. I think about the ice cream vendors and chip truck—the stops that punctuate our travels north during my childhood and teenage years, and how these have become less important with time. Air-conditioned cars and trucks, stocked fridges and freezers waiting on arrival at the lake, dull the appetite. With time, we seem to have forgotten to pull over, to take the time to chat. This may be nostalgia, but I tend to think that it has more to do with an attempt to return to the social—to the embodied interactions that punctuated our days before smartphones. What about those bits of road, curving sections that were left behind with the constant push to smooth out the terrain—industrial residue of an earlier communications technology? As the older maps suggest, there are large parts of these roads—corduroy roads, footpaths, portage routes—that have been lost. Forgotten segments of highway have been submerged beneath the surface of the lake when the province began regulating watershed and lake levels rose, swallowing stumps and machinery as well.

Rights of passage that accrue territory and property seem to drift below a map that buckles and creases under the strain of individual dexterity and as yet unreconciled claims of colonizing histories. The lines between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous, between settlers and Anishinaabe, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee that were so carefully surveyed need to be revisited. The grid they helped put in place has begun to give way.

These thoughts came to me as I walked into work this morning, past the Art Gallery of Ontario. I carried them with me through the city, along Baldwin St., crossing Huron St. down Beverley St., along Dundas St., to McCaul St.

I hope you are well. And I look forward to hearing of your travels.

Sincerely,
Glen

POPE TO LOWRY, JULY 20, 2018

Dear Glen,

Good to hear from you, and to read of your thoughts about our meeting on the Toronto Islands. I'm a long way from the islands now, sat in a studio in the woodlands above Dalsfjorden. The days here are long, compared to Toronto, with daylight beginning in the early hours and the sun only sinking below the mountains around midnight. This makes for plenty of time outdoors, walking in the hills and through the trees, and late evening visits to the studio to work in the twilight. Wild flowers are in full bloom, and we browse the redcurrants, raspberries, and blueberries—or bilberries as I'd know them from Devon—as we walk through the heather on the hills, and along the mountain roads and tracks. I'm here on an artists' residency, at Nordisk Kunstnarsenter Dale working on the tail-end of my post-doc, and on Pinocchio's Ecological Thought, in collaboration with my partner, Sarah, and our two children—an ongoing project that enables us, as we put it in our proposal, "to think beyond the divide between humans and 'nature'…and also to acknowledge the importance for our art practice of a range of social relationships, such as those in our family life, and with new kin—whether human or otherwise."

The practical aspects of the post-doc took place back on Toronto Islands; my work here is to write—again, in correspondence—with geographer Lindsay Stephens who has taken part in my project at key moments, and who has also conducted her own research there. So, it's with these things in mind that I'm writing in reply to you, casting my mind back to our "rambling conversation"—a true description in every sense!—and to the themes that you introduce in your letter.

My first thoughts, perhaps unsurprising given the current cultural and political situation, is that it important to acknowledge that our conversation sprang from our work within higher education institutions in Canada and in Europe, and, I think, demonstrates our commitment to those institutions that are democratic, and open to transformation by its encounters with others—other institutions, students, faculty—while also maintaining an unswerving commitment—or belief, even?—in maintaining those values despite the political and cultural turns that threaten to destroy such institutions. We talked about approaches to pedagogy—to learning, to teaching—that chime with our thoughts on this; I think I went as far as suggesting that research itself, at the doctoral level, can also promote these kinds of transformations in the candidate themselves, in the departments and faculties through which the research is undertaken, in the disciplines that organize researchers' practice and thinking. I'm keen to make the kinds of anti-authoritarianism that inheres in some (but not necessarily all) contemporary higher education institutions, and which also informs so many who have studied, researched, taught, or supervised under their auspices. Our conversation was made possible by our commitments to this endeavour, and now seems like a good time to reiterate this.

It's not such a huge step to thinking about the problematics, and the possibilities, of such an egalitarian, open, and democratic ethos when it is faced with the imposition of arbitrary divisions between peoples, between people and "nature," between genders, between cultures. The aesthetics of these kinds of politics are familiar to us, and to our fellow artists, writers, cultural theorists, and art historians. Neat divisions, high-contrast, one thing arbitrarily invented into its opposite—all High Modernist tricks and conceits that keep everything in its place, controllable, and predictable given the right formula. The world that we know is contingent, ongoing, never resolves. Some humans still pretend to have their hands on the controls, pulling the levers to determine outcomes, while others—poorer, more vulnerable to the "unforeseen

consequences" of ultra-confident l[illegible]-pulling—bear the brunt. The material consequences of ideologically driven attempts at world control are obvious to them, and to us.

You and I walked on the Eastern Gap, and the debris from last year's high-water events on the Toronto Islands, and across Lake Ontario, northern New York State, and the lower reaches of the St. Lawrence River, was obvious. Plastics mostly. Not just the "microbeads" that grab the headlines, but all matter of crap, dumped anytime in the last thirty years, and now washed up.

In the week or so before we met, I'd been tipped off about a pile of lumber—huge, twenty-foot-long wooden planks of Scots pine—that had washed up on the north shore of Ward's Island. Although broken up, I managed to reconstruct what amounted to a twenty-eight by nine-foot pier-like structure, the two-inch-thick boards laid in a lattice. Floating in the shallow water near the breakwall, I invited a few close friends from the island aboard. Each wave lifted us and, eventually, removed the four-inch deck screws that I'd hammered through the water-logged timber. We were reminded of the power of the water surrounding the islands, and its constant influence on our lives; and of the ways in which its symbolic power had been marshalled by islanders in the past as they mobilized against the city in their fight to build a community there.

I'd planned for us to stand on this just-floating raft and for us to have had our conversation with the water, about the water, and the ways in which materialities of our lives "make themselves known" to us, as Timothy Morton reminds, "in no uncertain terms." But one of my fellow islanders did what islanders everywhere do, and salvaged the wood overnight. It now forms part of someone's new front porch.

I write this from a country that has made efforts to acknowledge that there is a material reality with which our human lives, so often withdrawn within a symbolic realm of its own making, is inextricably entangled. The Norwegian government divested from fossil industries, or so I'm told, as part of its commitment to the Paris climate accord.

There is no garbage on the shore here. None. And the water tastes like nothing but water. There is no noise of the Gardner Expressway, and I've not been drowned by my own mucus produced in reaction to the pollutants and irritants that float across the Toronto Inner Harbour from the downtown, the docks, and airport.

At the same time, we're not far from the turmoil of Europe's rampaging populist politics. With the divisions being redrawn—divisions between everything—we have to make sure to build our institutions, and live our lives, in ways that manoeuvre around this. And, I'd suggest, we have to do our academic and artistic work in ways that assist in this effort, or at least ensure that we do not reinforce or normalize creeping authoritarianism. Which is why I'm so glad that we could write to each other, and to enter into correspondence, as a way of working together. I'm eager to hear what you make of this as a form of academic writing, and as an artwork.

I'll sign off now, as it's time for me to see what my family's been up to. I get some "studio time" for myself while my son takes his afternoon nap; the rest of the time we work together, to work out how we can live and work "ecologically," partly as a way to grapple with Tim Morton's thinking on this, but also as a way for us to acknowledge that we live in-relation, never in isolation. That's for the authoritarians, and a whole other story…

All the best,
Si

LOWRY TO POPE, JULY 21, 2018

Dear Simon,

Thanks for your speedy reply. Midnight sun, berry picking with the family, and heading into the studio for some late evening studio time—all this sounds truly wonderful. Dalsfjorden sounds like an ideal place for a residency.

Your thoughts about the larger geopolitical contexts for our work—the various political engagements with the "democratic" institutions that mark our work individually and together—have me thinking about the fraught divisions of labour by which artist-researchers work. I think that maybe our interests have aligned so nicely because we each recognize the importance of being able (and willing) to move across the lines separating the etic from emic points of view. Are we creative practitioners within a university system and as academics/scholars with deep investments in artistic production? Yes and. Granted, this binary tends oversimplifies the labour and resistances that give our work meaning; it does nevertheless provide a useful shorthand with which to locate trajectories of power. Perhaps I would be better to ask how one learns to balance and remain mobile across discourses, media, disciplines, and geographies. A question of privilege but also one of commitment and risk—or so it seems to me.

With this in mind, I was moved too by your description of how you are involving your family in your thinking/working through an expanded understanding of kinship, and who or what constitutes kin. Expanding our understanding of social connectivity to include deeper engagements with the world around us—whether we think about this as "natural" or otherwise—makes a good deal of sense to me. As I think I probably mentioned, my partner, Elizabeth, is a social gerontologist. In any case, she often talks about the need to recognize the importance of "chosen kin" or "fictive kin," and in so doing, to resist the normative tyranny of "the family." In her research on institutionalized care or long-term residential care facilities, she notes that there is a tendency to default to an idea of family that can exclude other, non-blood relations. (As there are with schools and other state regulated systems.) This exclusion can be much to the detriment of the person in care. In a time of need, whether we are old or young, we want to be able to connect with loved ones who know us and have our best interests at heart—these loved ones may or may not be family (by birth or marriage), may or may not be "blood" relations. "Fictive kin" is a powerful concept with

which to challenge normative thinking; capturing the importance of stories in how we situate and relate to others, it gestures toward the need to recognize the creative act (fiction) in social definition. For me, the story of kinship, one's agency with regard to how this story is told, is vital, and more to point, it helps frame deep ethical concerns.

For much of our life together, Elizabeth and I let a Jack Russell terrier, Louis, organize our schedules and (because he didn't like being left behind and didn't like to fly) our travels back and forth across Canada. Louis completely transformed my sense of order. He allowed me to develop a deep understanding of how everyday structures impact health and well-being. He also taught me about affect and non-verbal communication—how the unspoken and unspeaking need to be taken into account. While he is no longer with us, I still carry the lessons Louis taught us into my approach to quotidian relations with others—human and nonhuman.

I pause to reflect on the hummingbirds that are thumbing and buzzing as I write this…The chipmunks, king birds, mergansers, wood tit…The hemlock, birch, and spruce shading us…

Louis taught me to be attentive to the constantly changing sounds, sights, and smells that surround us. You could say he taught me to walk, to take the time to move around outdoors, tuned to patterns of weather, flows of urban life, cycles of the seasons, and the interruption of the social…

(Letter left incomplete)

KNOWLES TO LOWRY AND POPE, JULY 26, 2018

Hi both,

Reading your letters, I must say I was sorry to miss the ramble around Ward's Island and was reminded of the last time I was there, in 2004 just before I left Toronto to move to Saskatchewan to take up a post at the University of Regina. I remember a long and intense walking conversation with my mother, working through the anxieties of life-changing decisions and what the future might hold.

I'm writing my response from my house on Palmerston Road, in Coventry UK, ~~the city in which I now live and work.~~ I'm looking into the garden I've spent countless hours staring at, the neighbour's tree, the climbing rose that winds up into its branches and the couple of wood pigeons that seem to constantly fuss around. It is not quite an open vista, not quite a fjord, or a Precambrian lake, but it's the view that sustained me through the PhD thesis written at this desk, exploring ideas of translocality in dialogue-based art. The framing myths built into urban infrastructures are apparent to me living on a road named after Viscount Palmerston, who served twice as British prime minister at the high of UK's colonial power. From what seems like the cliff edge of Brexit, the UK feels lost at sea, cut adrift, awash with the myths of imperial pasts. A return to Canada looks ever more appealing, your fragile sinking raft not withstanding, Simon.

This exchange of letters was initiated to bring into dialogue and share with an international readership, perspectives, and insights on artistic research in Canada, the UK, and beyond. Inviting you to lead the conversation, Simon, encourages this international perspective, given your roots as an artist and academic trained in the UK, currently living in Canada and temporarily relocated to Norway, but more so, because of the thought you have given to the relationship between art and research in all your contexts over many years. Between you both, there is a meeting of situated and mobile knowledge of Canadian and UK academia and beyond, and this exchange of letters aims to tease out the challenges in the current states of play within artistic research, perhaps re-examine familiar complaints about the growing role of metrics and the painful rise of managerialism in higher education that normalize certain forms of research and marginalize others.

Your letters offer a window onto a conversation about institutions, relationships, wanderings, transformations, and how we build, revise, and rebuild the structures of our lives, but they leave the reader with much more besides. They speak of lives lived through mobilities. We move, but more importantly, we share an interest in how

ideas move and move us, in how we learn through sharing, and how we build institutions that support creative transformational dialogues across disciplinary seas that divide. I think this is what we understand as "research-creation." I find this move toward blurring the boundaries between the academic and the creative very compelling and it's this form of action that research-creation is particularly adept at performing. The shift in exchange from the walking conversations on Ward's Island to the commitment of letter writing expresses this blurring movement, and leaves me wondering about the next migration to a dialogue between these texts and their next readers. I was struck by your willingness to come together in the project as strangers—to delve below the surface to the deeper questions your conversations on Ward's Island evoked: How should we live? What I understand from your letters is that they perform an approach to research-creation that commits to being moved, to being transformed, through unsettling experience and in relation to all that is around us. Is this a dialogue that will continue?

For now—RVK

EMAIL LOWRY TO KNOWLES AND POPE, JULY 28, 2018

Thank you for this, Rachelle. Absolutely, I feel the deadline hovering, but feel like we're getting somewhere.

In any case, I'm midway through a response to Simon's letter, which I'm planning to complete and send today. As I do this, I will no doubt weave in thoughts spurred by your wonderful letter. I really like the way you continue to draw out salient connections while adding a glimpse of your writing space and the personal/familial memories situating it/you.

Thank you, too, for your edits and attention to the letters. Our return to letter writing, for me an increasing strange, uncanny form of correspondence, has put me off balance, and I've been struggling with my language. But as a poet, I must say this clumsiness has not been a bad thing.

I will send our texts to Natalie Loveless. I'll be online and fully connected through work—unfortunately ☺

~~Enjoy Rome. And~~ More soon.

Glen

LETTER FROM LOWRY TO POPE, STARTED JULY 21 CONTINUES JULY 29, 2018

We are back at the cottage and I am working in the woodshed—quite literally "woodshedding." About a year ago in June, we were hit with a tornado, "a micro blast," as these events are now referred to locally, and all around the cottage eighty to one hundred year hemlocks, maple, and birch came down. Trees snapped under the direct pressure of the westerly gale; others twisted, breaking through the loose damp soil, corkscrewing up massive root balls, and downing surrounding trees as they toppled. It was horrifying. As the winds howled and rain came down in sheets, we cowered in the centre of the frame cottage, staying safely back from the windows, and hoping that should a tree fall the ridge beam would protect us.

The blast was over in seconds. Miraculously, the cottage was unscathed. There were trees down all around us. When the wind and rain subsided, we ran out to assess the damage. Trees were down all over the property. The lake level had dropped four to six inches. In minutes, the wind had pushed the water to the far end of the lake, causing a "micro tide."

Following the storm, our views of the lake were irrevocably changed. Not only had the wind cleared large swaths of property and dramatically altered a landscape that had existed more or less intact for the half-century Elizabeth has been coming to the lake, it radically transformed our understanding the social. Along with the bald bedrock, the root balls and tangle of trees also exposed an impressive colonial infrastructure. The storm ruptured what had been, for me at least, an invisible fabric and brought to light a complex network of social relations that imbricate our being here, being in place. By the morning after the tornado, the lake had come alive with boats ferrying anxious

cottagers back and forth from the landing—and back to relative safety off the lake. At the same time, Hydro One camps seemed to have materialized overnight; to help reconnect the area to the power grid, the Crown corporation had started to pull in reinforcements from across the province. The sky echoed with chainsaws, shouts, and falling trees. In an amazingly short time, helicopters were buzzing the lake, surveying power lines and dangling poles to replace the damaged poles.

Suddenly, it was as if 150 years of colonization snapped into action. The full force of government, industry, and capital were brought to bear. The undergirding of the Algonquin Highlands—as is the case with the rest of Haliburton, Muskoka, or the Kawarthas—was set out in the mid-nineteenth century by a network of Colonization Roads that run between the Ottawa River and the Great Lakes—Lake Huron, Lake Ontario—and Lake Simcoe. These roads, and the will to develop they helped define, were foundational to the establishment of an emergent nation. Following the storm, we were made aware of this grid of road, power lines, and settlements. For the most part, this infrastructure exists out of sight, more or less occluded by the lakes, trees, and rocks, absorbed into the popular ideals of cottage life or "nature." With the violence of the storm, we came to see just how much labour and energy is required reconnect us to the country to the cities.

Watching the helicopters, listening to the chainsaws, speaking to the Hydro One crews, and sharing information with neighbours, I became aware of what it means to be a "settler" in a very new way. Suddenly, my sense of what it means to be a "settler" took me beyond a type of gesture politics, based on an abstracted sense of historical connection: "As a settler ally etc." Instead, I was aware of the raw power of the state and that in trying to bring us back onto the power grid, it had underlined the fact that I was and am the beneficiary of the massive mobilization of capital, infrastructure, and labour. I want to write more about this. The infrastructure that erupted out of the storm appears to be exclusive to property owners. It remains in place to protect property and property values, while many Indigenous communities throughout

the province and country struggle for basic necessities: clean drinking water, safe roads, social services, and other amenities.

Sitting here in the woodshed, I have begun to research the local treaties and land claims—John Collins' Purchase (1785), Robinson-Huron Treaty (1850), Williams Treaties (1923), Treaty 20 (1818), Treaty 27 (1819), the Toronto Purchase (1787, 1805, 2010)—I am thinking about a new body of creative work that could grow out of these letters. It is still early days, but I have begun making sketches (in words) toward a photo-based installation project. Imagine en plein air a writer working away at an antique school desk that is perched on the edge of a rocky shoreline. I picture myself loading the canoe with a desk, books, and stationary—everything I need to write out of a space of conflict—and paddling (at times portaging) along a route through the bush of the Algonquin Highlands. At this point the exact details are pretty loose—in fact, we might say I am woodshedding, which is a precise description of my current location and a favourite metaphor.

As I write this, I realize I neglected to tell you why I'm in the woodshed. As it drew to light the social infrastructure surrounding the cottage, the storm introduced us to our neighbours. Because she has been coming here her entire life, the storm provided impetus for Elizabeth (and I) to reconnect across generations, to become familiar with people who had known her parents. The storm (re)introduced us to L, an arborist and trapper who Elizabeth's late parents had known for decades. Immediately after the storm subsided, Elizabeth called L. And he came to fell the compromised trees and to help with the overwhelming clean up—a process completed later in the winter with controlled burns. In the months that it took to complete this work, we got to know L. Whenever we could, we would visit L in his office/workshop. This space—I want to call it a studio—is unlike anything I've ever experienced. Surrounded by chainsaws of every shape and size, knives, tools, and other unrecognizable paraphernalia (like stretching boards for the beaver, marten, and mink pelts harvested in the winter), L attends to accounts and meets clients.

Throughout the late summer and fall as we visited often, and in conversation with L, Elizabeth and I got to know more about the local area and the lakes, trees, and the wildlife. We came to better appreciate the world her father, aunt, and grandmother came to in the 1950s. I began to think about how my relationships help mitigate a very direct relationship with Crown land. Beyond the simple terms that tend to describe a cottage as acreage, water frontage, boat or road access—the language of property—I have begun to think more clearly about the knowledge and skills involved in maintaining this space, what it means to actually live here, as L and his family do, opposed to visiting for a few weeks or months of vacation each year. Elizabeth and I noticed and liked the sheds that surround L's workshop. Eventually, we enlisted L and his son to build us a shed, a woodshed ostensibly to store the cords of birch left after the post-storm clean up. (Hemlock, which burns too hot for the wood stove, is not worth splitting and stacking.) Elizabeth and I were taken by the beauty of this structure—the smooth posts and beams hewn and sanded almost white from a balsam taken deep in the snowy bush this past winter. The woodshed is also a memento or monument to a transformational time in our life.

For today, it is not only a place to write, but the place to write this letter to you. I hope you are well, Simon. Apologies for drawing this letter out and for my less than immediate response to your last letter. As I expect, you can see our correspondence continues to inspire me and I look forward to taking the time to respond properly to Rachelle's intervening letter.

Sincerely,
Glen

LETTER POPE TO LOWRY AND KNOWLES, JULY 30, 2018

NKD

Norway

Dear Glen and Rachelle,

Glen, your account of the "massive mobilization of capital, infrastructure, and labour" that matched the force of the storm was an abrupt reminder of the importance to acknowledge the ways in which colonial power continues its work within Canada. Its persistence haunted our conversation on Ward's Island, as both of us have responded to the challenges of decolonizing academic life in our own ways, and perhaps feel it with increasing urgency. Your attentiveness to the ways in which Canada is maintained, practically and ideologically, in the Algonquin Highlands is a stark reminder of the sheer might that is brought to bear in a "state of emergency." Rachelle, I also wonder whether there's something to be learned from how British people feel as they hurtle towards the "cliff edge" of Brexit? Perhaps the deep social, cultural, and economic divisions that the referendum brought to everyone's attention is a call for us to work on the political effects of those divisions, or the different type of politics that can be done from here or perhaps it also offers an indication of the intensity of feeling that might be engendered when Canada faces up to its own existential crisis, and acknowledges the sovereignty of the Indigenous people and other Nations with whom it shares its land. Brexit might be prescient in that sense, not in its harnessing of crass populism, but in the ways that it demonstrates the ambivalence with which antagonism is dealt with in liberal, democratic cultures. But I would really like to chase your suggestions, Rachelle, and relate this concern with decolonization to a wider emancipatory project, and how the way we work as artists and researchers—the way we write in this instance—might contribute to this.

Recently, I've been working with Rachel Epp Buller, whose recent thesis "Dear Friend: a thesis in / of letters" (2018) takes the form of correspondence with friends, colleagues, those who have been influential in

Rachel's practice and thinking as an art historian and as an artist. Rachel stresses that letter writing "offers vulnerability, attention, listening, and attunement," not only between corresponders, but also for readers: "I invite you to think with me—and to slow down, take time, give care," she writes in her introductory letter.

Rachel is an accomplished academic who chose to undertake an MFA program as a way to reconnect with the practical artistic explorations that she had been introduced to as an undergraduate. As one of her supervisors, I was keen put Rachel's thesis into practice within the pedagogical relationship, and we agreed to enter into correspondence with each other, the results of which would be included within her master's thesis. I mention this because letter writing or correspondence, in this example, is not only resonant within the feminist discourse and practice that Rachel takes part in, but also exemplifies many of the qualities that we might expect from a more broadly defined "emancipatory practice." Letter writing can be open to informal language, our "mother tongue," our dialects and idioms; it is hopeful of, and contributes to, establishing, sustaining, and transforming relationships; and, given time, it can draw out the nuances of power differentials between interlocutors while working on their equalization. My claim to this is not through an appeal to the formal aspects of correspondence, but to the conditions that prevail once this form is taken up, taken seriously and put into practice where abstract, formal, and closed forms would otherwise be insisted upon.

This is one way of describing the tendency that you point us towards, Rachelle, the "managerialism" and the "audit culture"(s) that anthropologist Marilyn Strathern introduces in theory, and which many of us who have worked in higher education in the UK have experienced directly, however willingly or wittingly. Research, in some sectors of the UK's higher education sector, is largely experienced as an institutional-level phenomenon, as an audit undertaken every seven years, on which the fate of every university, department, and faculty rests. The Research Excellence Framework (or REF) demands that "returning research staff" are identified within their institution, who submit their

"outputs" for assessment by peer-review panels. The results of this audit are felt by the institution (where they rank in relation to others), departments (again, by ranking against other departments or subject areas nationally), and individuals (who are either "returning staff" or not, the consequence of which can decide the fate of individual faculty, but which is decided upon by those who manage them within a department or school; think of the opportunities for manipulation and coercion that this affords). Add to this the Teaching Excellence Framework, and institutional-level quinquennial review of programs, and you will get an idea of the ways in which we become implicated within cultures of auditing for the sake of "quality assurance."

Correspondence offers a manoeuvre around this slide towards "metrics" as the primary measure of quality. As Buller claims, the writing and reading of correspondence—such as this, our own written exchange—demands that we slow down, that we take time with someone else's thoughts—even when they are convoluted, tangential, or in the process of being formed. There is no matrix of "learning outcomes," not even a clearly stated "methodology" section or chapter, yet it is in here somewhere. Letters—unless from the county court, bailiffs, police, your bank, or indeed, the REF—are rarely a closed, authoritarian form. As you remind us, Rachelle, we are, all three of us, committed to exchanging ideas, learning from each other, and—for me this is perhaps the most important thing to press towards—to commit to working as artist and researcher in ways that aspire to moving others and where we are ourselves are moved— transformed by the people, things, creatures, cultures, plant life, ideas, et al. that we are in relation with. In the way that Donna Haraway puts it, writing of Katie King's work in *SF: Science Fiction*, *Speculative Fabulation*, *String Figures*, *So Far*, the validity of our work might be "in how well it learns and models how to be affected or moved" rather than in the "elegant but divergent parsimonies of explanation" that might otherwise be demanded of us. In this sense, we have no choice but to keep writing, keep thinking and

working together on this matter—to keep "naggin' vor" (or "knocking forward") as I would say in Devonshire dialect.

Here's looking forward to seeing where this takes us…

Best,

Simon