Exploring New Materialism Through Bobcaygeon’s Lock 32

I am walking beside the locks in Bobcaygeon, Ontario, thinking about the coming together of bodies: human bodies, bodies of water, things human and nonhuman. Known as Lock 32 in the Trent-Severn Waterway, the Bobcaygeon locks were the first settler-constructed development in the long, strange, process of connecting Lake Ontario with Georgian Bay/Lake Huron through a series of lakes, rivers, and canals. The waterway represents the joining of two very different bodies of water through spaces and time—the connectedness of land as it is joined and divided by canals, bridges, dams, and locks—and the connectedness of people and spaces which ebb and flow. To be at the locks in Bobcaygeon is to situate oneself at a crossroads, a roadway for traffic above, and a watery passage below; an interconnected space where the mixing of things, of bodies, is very real.

The locks at Bobcaygeon are not a natural occurrence, but constructed by settlers cutting out limestone and lining the shores with timber. This earthy surgery – a bypass of sorts – allows for the passage of vessels between bodies of water with different levels. By filling the lock with water, the vessel can be raised, and by releasing water, the vessel can be lowered. Although they are called locks (locking the water in, locking water out), they act more like doorways, breathing in and breathing out. As I wrote and felt, to experience the space is to understand it as a place of
great movement and congregation, of water and peoples and birds and sediment and painful history.

As I will explore in this paper, Lock 32 and the larger example of the Trent-Severn Waterway present an opportunity to understand how these human-created water spaces, dubbed anthropohydrocosms by researchers Émilie Saulnier-Talbot and Isabelle Lavoie (30), are fluid in intent. Throughout time, the Trent-Severn Waterway has been promoted as a strategic military tool, a political instrument, a commercial waterway, and as a recreational escape (Angus). As we explore anthropohydrocosms through the example of Lock 32, we can understand how they represent the mixing of space, bodies, and things in a way that highlights the importance of nonhuman actants participating in the rhetoric and creation of watery spaces. Water allows us to imagine new ways of knowing ourselves (Neimanis 29), and this paper aims to demonstrate the value of examining anthropohydrocosms for rhetorical study, specifically their ability to help dissolve the nature-culture divide, which has soaked western rhetorical tradition. Through anthropohydrocosms we can examine the conflict of human intention operating in a system where, to quote Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, "…they are not the sole or always the most profound actant…” (37). The examination of these places presents an opportunity to review human and nonhuman interaction and participation in the shaping of communities and ecosystems, but also acts as a reply of sorts to Haraway’s idea of urgencies¹ in the Anthropocene (37). Make no mistake, if we are to ever shift our thinking away from water as a resource, something to be divided, purchased, and sold, then we must cultivate better relationships with the waters which enliven us (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, 4; Druschke and Rivers, in press), and the places in which it flows.
To make this argument, first I review how we can examine anthropohydrocosms through place-based knowledge, and explore their felt sense through sensory ethnography. Second, I approach the concept of human-created watery spaces in relation to existing new materialist thought and scholarship. Then, using these approaches, I investigate the potential ways anthropohydrocosms offer us new ways of knowing through the example of the construction of Bobcaygeon’s Lock 32 in the Trent-Severn Waterway, and consider the enduring pain it has caused indigenous communities. Finally, I will reflect on the ways rhetorical new materialism might help us might chart a path forward down the long channel and through the locks.

**Going for a Swim**

How does one study a watery place? Water is often labeled and imagined as a stagnant, unmoving mass. Globes tell us where water is, help us understand its size and vastness, but not where it moves. Maps and charts may provide us with the depth of watery spaces, or channels by which to safely navigate, but they are static artifacts that must be continuously updated. Lakes, rivers, oceans, ponds, exist through time and space. They are in constant motion, yet we name waters individually and situate them in particular locations. *The fluidity of water makes it difficult to grasp.* Try to hold it and it runs right through your fingers. Except, that is not entirely true.

We are beings comprised of water, living on a watery rock. Our bodies consume, contain, and expel water. It enlivens and flows through us, but water can also be an awesome destructive force. Neimanis argues that humans are embodied creatures comprised of water, that it is not enough to simply say “I am a body of water” (29). Neimanis reminds us “bodies of water puddle and pool...they flow into one another in life-giving ways, but also in unwelcome, or
unstoppable, incursions” (29). Working from the perspective of a unified natureculture, thinking with our bodies and water, provides a helpful viewpoint for examining how we interact with and conceive of watery spaces.

Anthropologist Sarah Pink’s concept of sensory ethnography offers a potential way forward in examining the lock at Bobcaygeon and anthropohydrocosms. Pink offers sensory ethnography as a “fuller and richer” way of doing ethnography (“What is sensory ethnography?” video). A way which—quite literally—opens the practitioner’s eyes to their surroundings in an attempt to account for and acknowledge non-verbal ways of knowing. Experience then, is vital to the sensory ethnographer. For Pink, and for this work, sensory ethnography offers us a way forward that embodies the deconstruction of the separation between mind and body. Pink pushes the sensory ethnographer, “to understand the body not simply as a source of experience and activity that would be rationalised and/or controlled by the mind, but itself as a source of knowledge and subsequently of agency” (Doing Sensory Ethnography 24).

In this exploration of human-created water spaces, I follow Pink’s directive, where she proposes, “emplaced ethnography that attends to the question of experience by accounting for the relationships between bodies, minds and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment (Doing Sensory Ethnography 25).” Neimanis too, attends to the importance and specifics of a place, “we need to be more curious about our politics of location: Where is my body? When is it? Why is it – that I, that’s to what and whom? What are the membranes that separate it or differentiate it from others?” (29). Using this combined approach, in this investigation, I attempt to tread water in the potentialities of something ‘more-than’—knowledge of the vibrancy of things swirling in the waters—and of the possibilities for their use for rhetorical new materialists.
The emphasis of the knowledge of the senses cannot be understated in the investigation of water. To refrain from abstraction to the extreme, that is to keep our toes nestled firmly in the riverbed as we wade through this place, we must understand that watery places do not feel the same, look the same, smell the same, taste the same: “waters are carefully placed or embodied in specific materialities and spacetimes (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 5). An approach rooted in sensory ethnography keeps us grounded in reality, and—as we’ll examine next—attuned to the power of things in the spaces we share, where the urgencies of the anthropocene, the “all-to-ordinary…onrushing multispecies extinctions, genocides, immiserations, and exterminations” (Haraway 37) calls for new ways forward. Neimanis, perhaps echoing Haraway, calls for a new approach: “as glaciers melt, deltas flood, and we row our lifeboats down the middle of the River Anthropocene, it seems we need any valuable tool we can muster to negotiate the rising tide pushing in from the sea” (26).

Pink gives ethnographers options for investigating places with the senses. In a supplementary video interview for her book *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, she proposes walking as a method (*Doing Sensory Ethnography* 107). In the video she describes walking through space as a multisensory experience “in which we're feeling the ground under our feet. We're walking through an environment, we can feel the sun, or the wind on our skin. We're constantly viewing, and watching, and looking, and seeing, we can hear what's going on around us” (“What is sensory ethnography?”). The question for sensory ethnographers becomes what part of these findings is helpful to understanding the places and things around them. Pink says, “if place is central to our way of being in the world and that we are thus always participating in places, the task of the reflexive ethnographer would be to consider how she or he is emplaced, or entangled, and her or his role in the constitution of that place (*Doing Sensory Ethnography* 18).” I consider
this sensory ethnography approach something akin to what Bennett had in mind when she said we must “devise new procedures, technologies, and regimes of perception that enable us to consult nonhumans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions” (108). And so, I go back to the beginning of this essay, where being with the place (walking, sitting, swimming), becomes not only a way of knowing it better, but of listening to what a place has to offer. I sit with the locks and listen to the quiet of the water, walk along their shore and feel the cold concrete banks knock back at my feet, dip my hands in the water, and smell the leaves as they float by.

**Working with the Dampness**

In the introduction to the interdisciplinary anthology *Thinking with Water*, Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, present several foundational ideas about how scholars should proceed with water. Central among those ideas is the acknowledgement of water’s ability to “challenge our ways of knowing…by revealing ways in which nature and culture are always co-constituted” (5). We have already seen how sensory ethnography may help us work as emplaced (to borrow Pink’s term), to break down the concepts of the separation of mind and body. Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, solidify this as the direction hydrological investigations should take to avoid treating water as a substance that must be “managed and organized” (3). In this sense, water is given an agency of its own (more on this later) but it does much to break down the hierarchies and power structures that relegate water to the role of commodity resource. For the contributors to *Thinking with Water*, there is a conscious effort to enter a more “collaborative relationship” with water (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 4). As we will see, Lock 32 as a settler-constructed barrier, poses a serious challenge for even a well-meaning
investigation of rhetorical implications. In thinking of water in the concrete, not the abstract, but as an earthly gift to challenge our ways of knowing, Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, provide a way of framing water that allows for the investigation of spaces which have caused great pain.

Anthropohydrocosms are defined by Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie to “refer to any body of water that was created by human action on the environment” (30). They present a problematic case for fostering a collaborative relationship between humans and water. They are typically born from thinking of water as a resource. In their investigation of watery spaces created by humans, Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie categorize these spaces into deliberate anthropohydrocosms, resulting from “direct modification of the landscape to create an aquatic environment” and unintentional anthropohydrocosms, resulting from “impacts of human activity on one or more components of the landscape or on global climate” (31). Intentional anthropohydrocosms include rural farm ponds, artificial wetlands, canals, reservoirs, and ditches. Unintentional anthropohydrocosms are stranger ecosystems still, and include bomb crater ponds, rivers resulting from subsidence in deforested areas, or pro-glacial lakes and rivers resulting from climate change. All these spaces are categorized as anthropohydrocosms to situate them in relation to humans, and in that relation, we may have much to make up for: “Anthropogenic modification of all types of continental waters has led to changes in their distribution, numbers, shapes, sizes, dynamics, physicochemical properties, biodiversity, and functions” (Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie 30). What anthropohydrocosms do for us rhetorically is offer an entry point to spaces where intentions of human and nonhuman actants mix and mingle, what Jane Bennett calls an assemblage (23).

Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie are concerned with the ecosystems of anthropohydrocosms, and the benefits and detriments they can provide (both capable of sustaining life and endangering
Perhaps the best example of this is the case of large reservoirs resulting from the construction of dams, which as they state, can be large enough at regional levels to “influence climate and the biota…creating cooler summers and windier conditions that have a significant impact on tree growth” (Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie 34). However, these large reservoirs also produce the emission of methylmercury and greenhouse gas, displace human and nonhuman populations, destroy land-based ecosystems, and can cause waters downstream to dry-up (Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie 34). Water then, as both life giver and destroyer, flowing, pooling, and mixing in ways and with things to create new assemblages. For the rhetor, water can be seen as a participant, filling reservoirs and ditches, bomb craters, and mine voids. Humans may provide the means for water to flow to these places, to soak them, and change their very topography, but water’s mixed intentions bring the potential of life, and over time, like soft pebbles on a beach, are capable of wearing down the harshness of a place.

Anthropohydrocosms present water-spaces for investigation that not only break down our understanding of bodies of water as natural occurrences, but also provide us with a strange mixing of intentions, both human and nonhuman. It’s important to note that Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie are quite specific in their definition of these ecosystems, and so do not include, for example, reservoirs that are natural lakes (34). Investigating the case of Lock 32 may seem like it will cause a conflict, but I argue that the entirety of the Trent-Severn Waterway, including Lock 32 in Bobcaygeon, represents a significant enough change over time to the flow of water connecting two Great Lakes—over 386 kilometers, including 44 locks, natural lakes, rivers, and human-created canals—to warrant consideration as an anthropohydrocosm (“Trent-Severn Waterway National Historic Site.” Parks Canada). Lock 32 is significant as the first human attempt to develop the waterway, and as a central site of mixed intentions of actants. To draw
from both Sarah Pink, and Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, the locks help us conceive a real space where the actions of humans and nonhumans come together through water. Water is all around us, but this physical space challenges us to think outside of rough beaches, tide pools, and murky rivers, to consider the straight edge of a concrete shore. What was once an audacious attempt at control for strategic military and economic purposes, now exists primarily as a recreational site (“Trent-Severn Waterway National Historic Site.” Parks Canada). It’s important to consider the locks and the Trent-Severn Waterway as an anthropohydrocosm because it draws attention to their importance to our ways of knowing a place – and ourselves.

Anthropohydrocosms like Lock 32 provide us with an opportunity to conceive of human-nonhuman relations through water. Anthropologist Veronica Strang, lays this out precisely when she says “water’s ubiquitous capacity to flow between articulates most clearly that persons are biocultural beings, and that human–environmental relationships are composed of interactions between material and social processes” (135). Strang, in articulating a new materialist perspective in *Archaeological Dialogues*, calls on the vital materiality of Jane Bennett (which we will review as well) along with actor-network theory, and Ingold’s attention to more ecological processes to demonstrate existing scholarship on the liveliness of matter (135-136). Strang continues, “social theory has therefore generated increasingly fluid and permeable visions of inter-human and human–non-human relations. Things and people mix in complex and constantly shifting relationships” (136). It is these shifting relationships that interest us at Lock 32, where ideas of the “usefulness” of the waterway were begun. Western academic traditions have often seen humans as the only things capable of agency but as we will see when examining the construction process of the first locks in Bobcaygeon, water flows with wild unpredictability.
Investigating spaces like Lock 32 might help us understand actions and intentions of materials, things, acting in an assemblage, and Strang is far from the only scholar to point to the agency of things. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost show materiality as “…always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (9). It follows then that there is an unpredictability to the way matter forms or reforms. Perhaps Coole and Frost say it definitively: “one could conclude…that ‘matter becomes’ rather than that ‘matter is’ (10). While it certainly feels like humans lose something in the process, this reconceptualization of human-material relations gives us a new, slightly more even plane on which to operate. It also opens up space to conceive of situations where water and other materials used in the construction of the locks in Bobcaygeon operate and “become” with their own intentions. The mixing of materials and humans in this space creates entanglements, messy connections that intertwine like reeds in shallow waters.

In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett explores assemblages of humans and nonhumans, borrowing the term from Deleuze and Guattari (23). She describes these entanglements as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts…living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23-24). Things are carried in water, are submerged by it, locks breathe in water, people float down the Trent-Severn Waterway on boats. Fish, birds, wild rice, homes, bridges, leaves, logs, sediments, garbage, ducks, dams: the waterway flows with a vibrancy of all the things in its assemblage. Whereas anthropohydrocosms may ask us to consider the intentional and unintentional ecosystems that have created themselves from human-made watery-places, assemblages would place these things in a “confederation” of things. The
locks embody the assemblage because they centre our thoughts on a particular space and time where things mix and flow.

The Vibrancy of Lock 32

A Parks Canada placard overlooking Lock 32 explains construction on the original lock began in 1833 and experienced many setbacks including “lack of funds, political indecision, rebellions and world wars” (Fig. 1). What it doesn’t say was that the project, to allow vessels to easily pass between Pigeon Lake and Sturgeon Lake, was an abject failure, replaced by a second set of locks years later. In his book recounting the settler-story of the building of the Trent-Severn Waterway, James T. Angus explains that engineering errors and miscalculations of water levels, lead to a four-year construction project which ended in failure (14). A second lock (replacing the first attempt) was built four years after the failure, the second lock remained as the first completed step in the Trent-Severn Waterway (20). The failure of settlers in the construction of the original lock presents an interesting case of human and nonhuman actants, already entangled, and show the vibrancy of the materials in this assemblage.

Angus gives a basic outline of why a lock was needed by settlers looking to navigate inland waterways on their way from Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay: “a hydraulic life lock is designed in such a way as to create a step between two water levels, allowing vessels to be raised or lowered from one level to the other” (14). To build one requires the digging of a canal and “…precise measurements of and knowledge of the high- and low-water levels…” (Angus 14). The design of the original lock at Bobcaygeon relied on “sketchy” specifications and general estimates of water levels, with the wide walls made from oak and pine timber and gates made from the same oak timbers covered with pine. Angus explains the lock was to be placed in a
canal cut through limestone rock (15). As Angus recounts, construction during the first summer was spent cutting the canal through the rock, with sledge hammers and blasting, and contending with swarms of flies “‘blue devils,’ that filled the warm August air…” (15). Workers also contended with unexpected heavy rains, but despite these setbacks, including the insolvency of James Bethune (Angus 15) one of the original proponents and financiers of the lock, work continued until the lock was ready to be tested. However, during the first test, water was let into the lock only to have it give and leak “so bad that the water [would] not rise” (Angus 18). As Angus tells it, the limestone which settler constructors had cut through was full of crevasses and fissures, enough that the water “disappeared into the deep cracks, none of it reaching the lock” (18). Though, even if the settlers had been successful in damming the leaks of the canal and filling the lock, it had not been properly leveled, and for weeks at a time, boats would not be able to enter or leave the locks (Angus 18). There was another problem to compound the trouble with the canal and engineering of the lock – the dam which was built to flow water into the canal was not high enough, meaning boats would not have been able enter the canal at low water (18). The story of the construction of the lock at Bobcaygeon by settlers can be seen as a story of faulty work, shoddy engineering, unpreparedness, but also as a story of humans unaware of the vibrancy of the land. Again, Bennett may be helpful here in unpacking the assemblage encountered by the setters, of limestone, and oak timbers, and flies. Bennett, in recounting Latour’s story about Amazonian trees in *Pandora’s Hope*, comes to an understanding of the mixing of actants in Latour’s story and of the agency in “…a natural system understood not as a mechanical order of fixed laws but as the scene of not-fully-predictable encounters between multiple kinds of actants” (97). For Lock 32, the limestone fissures seep, the oak timbers buckle, water levels rise and fall. The story presents us with a historic account of the agency of
assemblages in a space undoubtedly strange to settlers, but it’s important not to chalk the failure of the first lock up to a series of unfortunate events. Angus himself seems torn in where to place blame. “The mistakes made in the Bobcaygeon works were the result of faulty engineering done by a land surveyor inexperienced in lock construction…” he writes, but he does not discount the importance of understanding connection to the space, admitting “although one can easily determine a high-water level on an unfamiliar lake from water stains on the rocks and shoreline vegetation, it is virtually impossible to determine low-water levels by sight” (18-19). Before practicing a little time-travel and considering Lock 32 as it exists today, Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, offer perhaps, an acknowledgement of what Angus could not articulate—of water not as an abstract concept where engineering norms can be easily translated from one lock to another—but as something situated, something real, in place and in time.

“We come to identify with, or are touched and moved in different ways, by the waters that we experience. Situating water therefore requires that we become more aware of the daily practices and repeated encounters through which we locate ourselves in relation to water. And, in turn, we need to acknowledge the wealth and complexity of these watery relations, including how we share these relations with many others” (8).

The failure of the original lock is representative of the separation we grapple with of nature and culture. When we are the waterlines, the rapids, and canals, when we know ourselves through the waters and places that give us life, “…we may situate ourselves in ways that challenge land-based reconceptions of fixity” (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 8).

Situating, Place-Thought, and New Materialism at Lock 32
It’s November 9, 2020. I am sitting on the Western entrance to Lock 32 on the Southern bank, where the water is dark in the shade of the tress that line the canal (Fig. 2). Dark, but not deep. I can see the rocky bottom. Oak leaves float on the surface of the water below me. There is a bird’s nest on a post in the middle bank and ducks in the reservoir behind the dam. Seagulls and buffleheads are gathering on the rocky island below the falls. There is a flyswatter at the bottom of the canal catching my eye – resonating with *Thing-Power.*\(^6\) In the reservoir, a little cottage on a small island lined with stones to protect against erosion and a small dock, slightly lopsided. It all feels like it’s sinking. Maybe these are the limestone fissures draining me away. There is a concrete barrier around most of the entrance to the dam and locks. It stands in sharp contrast to the grassy shore on the western side of the reservoir. To my left is a dark sand beach and small tress marking the shore. I can imagine the water saturating the ground. I am sitting on concrete steps, cracked and stained by the seeping water. The sun’s light is reflecting off the water on the concrete wall – shimmering\(^7\) – and the concrete feels fluid and not so permanent. It cracks and crumbles and stains and seeps. It is a steadier boundary in time than the beach and the natural shore, but these steps are participants in the same system, they just operate on a different schedule.

**Rough Waters in the Channel**

Druschke and Rivers weave a watery narrative in their article *Rhetorical Drift* (in press). Their winding, side-by-side, streams of rhetoric, perhaps embody how it is possible to think in fluid ways. Rivers’ stream pools in a rallying cry of sorts for scholars of new materialism, to keep their discussions grounded in the practical ways that we can cultivate responsibility and relationships between things, living and nonliving. This is why I sit on the concrete steps of the
lock at Bobcaygeon. Why I take Sara Pink’s advice and walk – under the bridge that crosses overhead, walk and record video, walk and write thoughts. Rivers asks “what does a river teach us about persuasion?” (3). Being at Lock 32, I feel drenched by entanglements. The lock is situated in the centre of town. Cars drive across the canal and people walk the shores. Seasonable businesses open when recreational houseboats and others crowd the banks of the lock. Bufflehead ducks on their way south and east congregate and dive for fish in the conservation area of the reservoir (Fig. 5). Lock 32 draws these things together, participates in the space with them, providing not only a means of passage, but an enticing reason to float here for a while.

Caroline Druschke writing with Nathaniel Rivers asks us to consider the case of the persuasiveness of repeat flooding of the Kickapoo River, which she says “offers an increasingly frequent and powerful reminder of agential force: absent of purpose, destroying farmland, barns, houses, towns, continually reconfiguring the landscape, and exceeding control” (4). Druschke explains after the third devastating flood in a decade, residents (and herself) began to come together to share their flood stories – she shows the conversations about the flooding experiences as “beginning to ask whether the river and the sediment it moves can be collaborators” (4). There is, as Druschke calls it, “raw power” in water’s persuasive ability, but also, in considering its power, perhaps a point of emphasis to be applied to the examination of anthropohydrocosms.

The dams that dot the Trent-Severn Waterway, the carving of a canal through porous limestone, the breathing of Lock 32, these are the coming together of a world that always existed as one.

“I want to urge non-Indigenous RNM scholars to consider what kinds of systems of responsibilities might emerge from the relationships between living and non-living beings that sit at the center of our work. To consider a kind of relationality with the
potential to hold us accountable and to address what we might be accountable to”
(Druschke and Rivers, in press).

This is what anthropohydrocosms can offer us. A not-so-perfect relationship that is grounded in
the “hard practical that necessitates goodwill, and mistake making, and messy coordination”
(Druschke and Rivers, in press). Angus’ settler-story of the carving of Lock 32 is a violent
coming together of persuasive intentions, one without listening, let alone collaboration. One that
perfectly demonstrates the consequences of a one-sided approach, but also gives us room to
include Druschke’s ask that we consider responsibilities of things living and non-living. That
includes responsibilities to the peoples disrupted by the development of Trent-Severn Waterway,
and by the white settler-led construction of locks and dams in the traditional territory of the
Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg (Mississaugas) (Whetung 16).

Madeline Whetung deconstructs the settler history of the Trent-Severn Waterway, and
calls out the Bobcaygeon lock specifically for its space celebrated as a “National Historical Site
of Canada” even though it was conceived by powerful settler businesses men “as a public
enterprise toward their own material gain” (Whetung 17; Angus 4). To Whetung the Trent-
Severn Waterway represents a “slow violence” on the land, its construction from Lake Ontario to
Georgian Bay not complete for nearly 100 years. As Whetung explains, within the Treaty 20
negotiations of 1818, which conceded the lands on which the lock at Bobcaygeon was built,
“Mississaugas asked to keep the bever houses” (25). The request, demonstrates the deep
relationship that exists between the Nishnaabeg, nonhumans, land, water, and shores:

“Given the ecological relationship that beavers share with shorelines through their
beaver houses and dams, the beavers maintain and influence the shoreline and the
waterway. This relationship plays an integral role in homeplace creation for other
plant and animal relatives as well as for us as Nishnaabeg, as beaver damming creates wetland spaces that allow much of what we depend on for survival to thrive. This stands in contrast with the massive human dams created through the brackets of colonial law, which led to flooding of shorelines and wetland destruction as colonizers worked to create a waterway deep enough to bring steamships through” (Whetung 25).

Whetung’s work should give us pause. Could/should this be the end of the usefulness of Lock 32 for rhetorical study? The entire waterway was built by settlers for their own gain, and carved out of land without permission or attention to plants or animals, and without attention to the entangled relations of those living by its shores. It stands, as Whetung says, “as a monument/infrastructure to colonial violence both intimate and national” (30). There is old, enduring pain here, and in this sense, it is difficult to imagine Lock 32, let alone the Trent-Severn Waterway as embodying any sort of rhetorical value, especially as a good place to think about assemblages. But to swim back to our own shores and abandon this space would be to perpetuate the slow violence. Donna Haraway, in the opening page of Staying with the Trouble, offers a potential way forward.

We—all of us on Terra—live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response. Mixed-up times are overflowing with both pain and joy—with vastly unjust patterns of pain and joy, with unnecessary killing of ongoingness but also with necessary resurgence” (1).

If we are to become capable with each other, and with bumping into things, perhaps we must float in this water with resurgence.
Anthropohydrocosms are fluid in intent. They may begin with one intention, like economic prosperity, and become something else, like a tourist destination. By the time it opened in 1920, the intent of the Trent-Severn Waterway was a far cry from where it began. It is now a tourist destination, a system of recreational waterways, and a monument to the slow pain of colonization (see Figs. 1, 3, 4).

When Neimanis, or Chen et al., or Druschke and Rivers, ask us to situate ourselves next to the bodies of waters that enliven us, we come to understand these things not simply as an inert element contained in a pool. Water flows through time and space, and carries with it the past and repercussions for the future. Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie show how immeasurable human violence to land, to nonhumans, and to each other, can over time become vibrant ecosystems. Life in bomb craters, life in mine void pit lakes. They show how the legacy of 2 million tons of bombs dropped on Laos during the American military intervention in southeast Asia during the 1960’s and 1970’s violently cratered the landscape (37). The craters were 10-15 meter diameter and a few meters deep, filled with water and were stocked with fish by locals to practice fish farming, and used to irrigate farmland in other cases. While Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie say water has not been tested and wartime chemicals may still exist, it “appears that these anthropohydrocosms, despite their wicked origin, now offer valuable ecosystem services for local populations” (37). As they investigate mine void pit lakes, Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie show many of these anthropohydrocosms to be toxic and require extreme caution in their management, but demonstrate the Lustain Lakeland area of Germany, which was once heavily polluted now contains pH-neutral lakes stocked with fish, “these anthropohydrocosms are developing into ecosystems which support biodiversity worthy of conversation” (37). Lock 32 and its surrounding dams and reservoirs enable a watery passage from one lake to another, but
they also retain water, breathing it in before exhaling. In this way, the water that flows through the locks keeps us moving forward toward new possibilities for engaging in more collaborative ways, but also, as water is trapped by the locks it reminds us that we must tell the stories of how these places came to exist, acknowledging their pain and their life in the same conversation. When we situate ourselves beside the bodies of water that enliven us, we are engaging with the past and present, with all the stuff that floats, sinks, and swims in the water, we are soaked in past pains, and feel the glint of shifting intentions.

Though I have tried to answer it, the question remains, where do we go from here? I believe anthropohydrocosms, Lock 32, and the larger example of the Trent-Severn Waterway, are immensely powerful spaces for demonstrating the mixed intentions of human and nonhuman actants, and for considering the pain possible by thinking of the separation of nature and culture. What type of relationships with people, with nonhumans, can be cultivated when we let ourselves drift from familiar shores? Jane Bennett ends *Vibrant Matter* with “I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests” (122). This is the stream in which new materialist scholars must swim. It is not enough to dip your toes in the water, you need to dive for the bottom, and take a big gulp on your way back up. Druschke and Rivers wade in the streams of the Kickapoo, “collaborating with current and past residents, and engaging with the social and biogeochemical history, present, and future of these streams and this landscape…” (6). Druschke and Rivers say that where rhetorical new materialism is overly concerned with the relationality of objects “at the expense of mutual responsibility and place” (6-7), its potential could lie instead not in the concept of relationality in the abstract but the “possibilities of relationality as responsibility” (7 their emphasis). This
examination of Lock 32 tries to take up that cause. It situates us at the messy centre of Haraway’s troubling and turbid times, beside and consumed by relationships of living and non-living beings, and asks us, as I have begun here as a non-indigenous scholar “to consider a kind of relationality with the potential to hold us accountable and to address what we might be accountable to” (Druschke and Rivers 8).

Accountability is not some abstract thought to end on for a non-indigenous new materialist examination of this space, but a real call to action. Lock 32 at Bobcaygeon is located on the traditional land of the Mississaugas of the Anishnaabeg nation, where the Curve Lake First Nation exists today. In the days I spent on the lands in Bobcaygeon by the lock, I spent time with seagulls, mallards, and buffleheads. I sat with cracked concrete and walked over settler-made bridges. I visited two conservation areas for fish in the area. They did not want to be seen when I was in that space—maybe a reminder of pain and of the potential of resurgence. Whetung reminds us that over-fishing and continued recreational fishing means the pickerel in these waters are not fatty enough to properly smoke, and that eel and salmon no longer swim these waters because of dams (18). I am accountable to the flyswatter drowned in the canal, and to the Parks Canada monuments to settler slow-violence, and to the continued violence these anthropohydrocosms represent. I am also accountable to the responsibility to consider the ways the lock breathes and exhales with a very real vitality, to the cracked and seeping barrier-shores, and the limestone fissures draining it all away.

Notes

1. Haraway uses urgencies instead of emergencies to keep things from sounding too “apocalyptic or mythologic” (37). If we are to stay with the trouble here, it’s important to keep our feet on the ground.
2. With understanding that Pink’s sensory ethnography approach was published as *Doing Sensory Ethnography* a year prior to Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*.


4. These are not anthropohydrocosms because dams were simply installed to control water levels. For more see Saulnier-Talbot and Lavoie p. 34.

5. This paper does not explore Ingold, but for more, see Ingold, Tim. “Towards and ecology of materials.” *Annual review of Anthropology*, vol. 41, 2012, pp. 427-442.

6. Jane Bennett’s Thing-Power in *Vibrant Matter* to be exact, “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6).

7. See: Seigworth, Gregory J. and Melissa Gregg. “An Inventory of Shimmers.” The Affect Theory Reader, edited by Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 1-25. “That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves” (1).

8. Literally, for 1,000-plus hours (Druschke and Rivers, in press). And this is where we need to be. Not abstractly considering waters implications, but knee-deep in the flow. It is, to be certain, where this essay has room to grow.
9. For more on Curve Lake First Nation, see: www.curvelakefirstnation.ca, also see Works Cited in this essay for more detailed entry.

Works Cited/References


Fig. 1: Parks Canada Signage at Lock 32 in Bobcaygeon hinting at setbacks which beset construction.

Fig. 2: The steps on the Southwestern entrance to the canal at Lock 32.
Fig. 3: A Monument celebrating the construction of the Trent-Severn Waterway at Lock 32.

In 1833 the Legislature of Upper Canada authorized improvements to the waterways of the Newcastle District, the first of which was a wooden lock here at Bobcaygeon. Three years later the first funds were appropriated for the opening of a waterway via the Trent River and the Kawartha Lakes to link Lake Ontario with Lake Simcoe (and later with Georgian Bay). This system was intended to open up the interior of the province, and to promote agriculture, lumbering and commerce.

Le legs de la province de l’Ontario est autorisé en 1833 à améliorer les voies navigables du district de Newcastle et, d’abord, le premier ouvrage, une écluse de bois, fut érigé à Bobcaygeon. Trois ans plus tard des fonds furent débloqués pour ouvrir la rivière Trent et les lacs Kawartha à la navigation entre le lac Ontario et le lac Simcoe et, ultérieurement, la baie Georgienne. Ce réseau de voies navigables visait à ouvrir l’intérieur de la province à la colonisation et à promouvoir l’agriculture, la forêt et l’industrie forestière.
Fig. 4: Parks Canada signage at Lock 32 detailing settler industry and behaviour.

Fig. 5: Fish Sanctuary on the North side of Lock 32.
Fig. 6: Lock 32 and overhead bridge in Bobcaygeon.

Fig. 7: Downstream of the dam at Bobcaygeon rapids
Fig. 8: Runoffs and stairs around the dam at Bobcaygeon rapids.