



## Creative Intervention

### To Marsh: Propositions for Relating Otherwise

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*To Marsh* is a web-based project working as a conduit for co-creation, sym-  
poiesis, and “making together” through different creative practices (see  
<https://tomarsh.ca/>). It was created in 2022 in response to Robin Wall  
Kimmerer’s (2013) invitation to engage with “the grammar of animacy:” a  
grammar that charts relations with other-than-human beings by reminding us  
of their sentience, agency and role as knowledge holders. Through a series of  
slow walks to the Marsh, currently known as “Cootes Paradise” in Hamilton,  
Ontario, Canada, the artists developed various responses to these emerging  
relations in the form of illustration, sound, code, and text-based propositions.  
These responses, hosted on the *To Marsh* website, explore multiple ways of  
relating to the natural world. Over the years, the Marsh has been subject to  
abuse and neglect, most recently (2014-2018) in the form of a 24-billion litre  
raw sewage spill. While physical containment efforts are important and  
ongoing, this project aims at a different kind of re-mediation, in which we learn  
to recognize and relate to the Marsh as a complex living being. This project is  
also a proposition offering online visitors the opportunity to pursue more  
intimate ways to relate to the land they are on, and, in turn, to build reworlding  
collaborations through creative practices. In this text, we outline the theoretical  
underpinnings of a project that is a creative practice of reworlding as it re-  
imagines and challenges colonial ways of knowing that foreground  
anthropocentrism, human exceptionalism, and the objectification of the other-  
than-human world.

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## **To the Reader**

Before reading the remainder of this text, we invite you to visit the website (<https://tomarsh.ca/>) and engage with some of its propositions, and perhaps apply them to the territories with which you feel a call to encounter more intimately.

As a web-based project, *To Marsh* works as a conduit for co-creation, sym-  
poiesis, and “making together” through different creative practices (illustration, sound, code and walking) that explore language as multiple ways of being in and with the world, rather than a grounding in a fixed meaning. Conceptually, the project responds to Robin Wall Kimmerer’s (2013) “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” where she encourages us to shift the English language’s strategic objectification of the Land through nouns by turning them into verbs, for example “to be a bay” (p. 50). This seemingly simple transformation has the potential to unravel other ways of speaking not *about*, but *with* the Land, thus, letting language recognize the world as a space where everything is alive. This creative digital intervention emerges from the recognition of the interdependencies between human and other-than-human beings. Our creative work seeks to catalyze reworlding by re-imagining and challenging colonial ways of knowing that foreground anthropocentrism, human exceptionalism, and the objectification of the other-than-human world. We first contextualize the project and the land it learned from before sharing its theoretical underpinnings as well as our creative intentions. We conclude with a short reflection on how this project’s multiple propositions can become a practice for reworlding, where we challenge colonial ways of relating to the land.

## **Points of Departure: Visiting the Marsh**

We (Nick and Andrea) met in a graduate class at McMaster University, which required the creation of an artistic output that would draw from what is commonly understood as nature. We were excited to mix our creative practices and interests and be surprised by what would unfold. Nick is an artist who works with sound, collage and creative coding, and Andrea is a community-engaged artist who works with multi-media storytelling and illustration. What unfolded was the combination of multiple creative formats that are now inhabiting the project’s website.

Nick was interested in the Marsh, colonially known as The Cootes Paradise Sanctuary, accessible from Ontario’s McMaster University campus. In 2021, he started a regular walking and bird-watching practice in the Marsh to establish an understanding of and connection with the place. *To Marsh*, the web-based project, emerged as a creative intervention that was responsive to this environment, which Nick proposed to engage through collective walking practices in the ravine road trail that leads to the Marsh. In the winter of 2022,

for over two and a half months, both of us started visiting the Marsh, sometimes together, sometimes alone, and sometimes with our class peers. In total, we visited the Marsh six times in walks that ranged from one to three hours. The purpose of these walks was to become familiar with the Marsh by being the “audience to conversations in a language not our own” (Wall Kimmerer, 2013, p. 46).



*Figure 1.* Untitled. (Illustration by Andrea Vela Alarcón)

### **About the Marsh**

Cootes Paradise Marsh is situated at the westernmost end of Lake Ontario in the traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Attiwoonderk and Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Due to the colonial erasure of Indigenous people and the refusal to conceive of other-than-human beings as sentient, the marshland takes its name from British Captain Thomas Cootes, who, while stationed in the Niagara area during the American Revolutionary War, was known to be an avid angler and hunter (Haines et al., 2011). Since 1927, the Marsh has been owned and managed by the Royal Botanical Gardens (Cootes Paradise Trails, n.d.). However, in this text and the project, we refer to the marshland as the Marsh, whom we understand to be an important collaborator.

According to David G. Smith (1997), up to the mid-19th century, the Marsh was a rich habitat of shallow waters covered in cattails, wild rice, wild celery, and other submerged plants. This changed with the industrialization of Hamilton, the construction of the Desjardins Canal, and the introduction of carp. Though the Marsh remained essential for the prosperity of fish spawning and various bird species, through the years, the Marsh has been “considerably degraded by excessive contaminant inputs from wastewater treatment plants (WTPs), marsh tributaries, and Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs)” (Mayer et al., 2008). Among the most recent and visible environmental catastrophes that impacted the Marsh is the Chedoke Creek Spill from 2014 to 2018, where a valve of the city’s sewer was left open and released 24 billion litres of raw sewage, which caused a layer of biohazardous sediment to settle at the bottom of Chedoke Creek (Cootes Paradise Trails, n.d.). The spill was publicly acknowledged by the City of Hamilton in 2018, and in 2020, the city’s environmental impact report suggested the remediation of the Cootes Paradise would not be required as there were no long-term ecological impacts and “there was no benefit to a further clean up” (Craggs, 2020). However, the province of Ontario ordered the clean-up of the sewage spill, which was set to start in 2021 and conclude in 2022 (Hristova, 2023a). In July 2023, these initiatives were still ongoing and set to finish in October of the same year. The City of Hamilton entered a guilty plea in the Ontario Court of Justice, where it is now set to pay a fine of almost two million dollars (Hristova, 2023b).

### **About the Project and Our Intentions**

As mentioned earlier, *To Marsh* is guided by Wall Kimmerer’s invitation to engage with a grammar of animacy, where our language attunes to the living world and recognizes it as an animate ecosystem and as a teacher, not as an inert backdrop to human activity.

We paid particular attention to unsettling the colonial tendency embedded in the English language to “thingify” living beings through nouns, by emphasizing the agency of five other-than-human beings through a verb-based understanding that foregrounded their agency: to sapling, to bird, to cattail, to bark and to marsh. We recognised these verbs during our practice of slow walking, listening, and looking in the Marsh known as Cootes Paradise. These practices involved long moments of contemplation and stillness, like looking at the same beings from different angles and distances while being reminded we are also being looked at and touched by other beings in the Marsh. Or sitting down for an hour and listening to the different volumes in which the Land speaks. We understand this embodied attunement and practice as one of sym-poetic play (Haraway, 2015), a making-with that happens through speculative work under the non-functional nature of play.

We recorded our sym-poetic play through the method of scoring or propositions. In this practice, we followed the work of Fluxus, an international

group of artists during the 1960s and 70s who emphasized participatory events over the art object (Springgay, 2022). Scores are open instructions or propositions that prompt participants to engage in simple actions or procedures to discover new meaning in aspects of everyday life. Stephanie Springgay (2022) highlights that through scores, we can catalyze practices that are indeterminate and situated in the ordinary. Our scores are invitations for those who engage online with *To Marsh* to sensorially perform a simple, quotidian action, and practice “new ways of going-on together” (Haraway, 2015, p. 235). These scores are the resulting combination of the slow walk’s observations, as well as explorations of the biological characteristics of those beings and elements towards whom we were drawn and with whom we felt a connection. For example, one of the scores, *To Sapling*, is the result of observing how saplings move and are moved by the wind, as well as reading about their need to be flexible while reaching maturity. *To Marsh* invites the online audience to adopt this verb-based sensibility as it stages encounters with birds, cattails, bark, saplings and the marsh.

Our scores in the Marsh were accompanied by different audio-visual recordings as an attempt to-expand from the descriptive limitations of the text by embracing the other senses. Andrea’s figuration response was through illustration and a short video poem. She was especially called by saplings and cattails. Throughout two walks, Andrea gathered footage of cattails from different scales, where one can see their vast presence in the Marsh through a wide lens angle, as well as the detail of a cattail’s flower with a macro lens. Her video poem overlays images of the many and the singular cattails, with text that focuses on her understanding of the verb form *to cattail*. This video work was meant as an invitation of intimacy, of smoothing connections and attachments with different parts of a cattail, whom Andrea had not stopped to see, listen or feel with before. As you see across the *To Marsh* website, Andrea’s illustrations accompany the text. As figures, the illustrations are multiple synthesized dimensions of an experience, particularly of the affective registries elicited throughout the visits to the Marsh and the understanding of the verb *to marsh*. The illustrations present the multiple sensations of interdependence felt in the Marsh, a container of many worlds and doings that included both of us human authors.

Nick’s figuration response was through audio and code. Drawing inspiration from Hildegard Westerkamp (2019) and R. Murray Shafer in David New’s film *Listen* (2009), he created *To Bird* (see <https://tomarsh.ca/bird>), a collection of three sound poems improvised around the soundscape of the Marsh. Nick recorded the singing of three birds (goose, robin and blackbird) and then explored how their sounds interacted with the acoustic resonators of the environment (structures in the environment that change how we hear things). In the McMaster University audio studio, he matched the birds’ songs with instruments that he found shared a melodic similarity; these instruments were a flute, a water bottle, and Nick’s own voice. He later composed the sound poems by leaving the birds’ song untouched, and digitally manipulating the

improvisations of the instruments he played to match the singing of the birds. These sound poems acted as a new opportunity for Nick to pay attention and acknowledge the importance of listening as a means to connect his heart and senses to the environment and practice reciprocity with the other-than-human world. His second response, *To Bark*, implemented a way for visitors to the *To Marsh* website to interact and create their own art. Using pieces of bark that were photographed and digitally manipulated into abstract shapes with changing colors, website visitors are encouraged to move them around to create new forms and shapes, reflecting the infinite stories that trees carry with them.

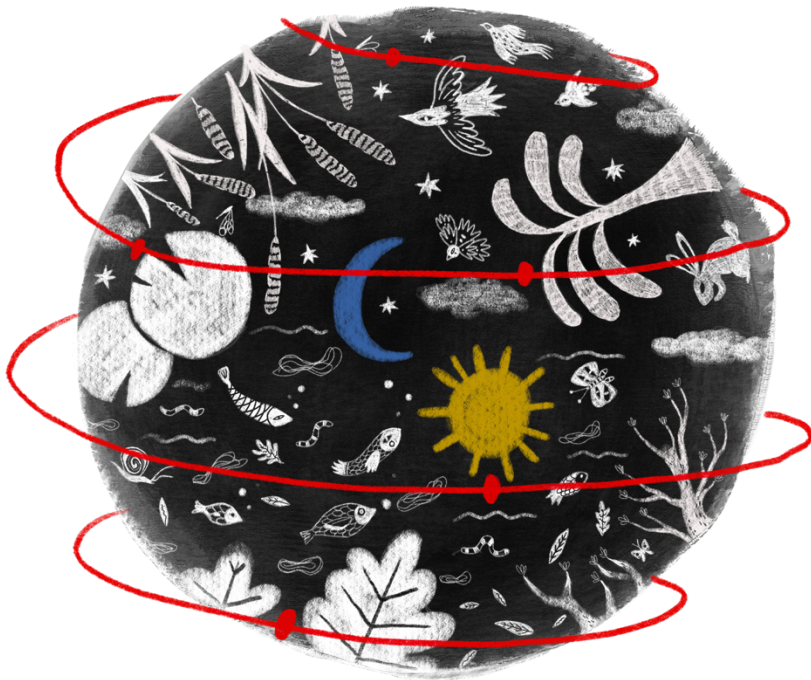


Figure 2. The Marsh. (Illustration by Andrea Vela Alarcón)

### ***To Marsh*, a Practice of Reworlding**

When we were crafting our understanding of what the Marsh is and does as a verb (you can see the full definition here: <https://tomarsh.ca/about>), we came up with a description that foregrounded two necessary things for reworlding. First, the recognition of multiplicity and the existence of interconnected worlds, and second, the need to embrace slow movement as a practice for restoration and nurturing of bodies in conditions of precarity.

As a digital archive and as a practice that pre-existed the digital form, this project is an enactment of the action: “to marsh.” First, the website takes on the practice of “marshing” as it acts as a container of multiplicity, seen in the various creative practices involved in the creation of the project, such as the illustrations, sound poems and text-based propositions, as well as the slow walks that allowed for these creative expressions to unfurl. Second, *To Marsh* is also us practicing and extending to others an opportunity to restore and nurture their relations to the natural world. This project was created as a slow and small opening for reworlding through the thinking-doing of an “ethical relationality” (Donald, 2010, as cited in Todd, 2015) that is not just about acknowledging each other’s presences, but exploring the interconnections, and, most importantly our implications in the unravelling of the common fate(s) we share with other forms of life. In this sense, relating otherwise to the Marsh is a different kind of re-mediation that expands the physical containment efforts of the 24-billion litre raw sewage spill towards the recognition of the Marsh as a complex living being.

We offer this short reflection and creative digital intervention in the hopes of encouraging others to practice reworlding creatively, and to explore their own human and other-than-human collaborations.



*Figure 3. To Sapling (illustration by Andrea Vela Alarcón).*

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