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OPEN RIVERS :
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

RIVERS AND MEANING

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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking water, place & community
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK. Image by Jill Diamond on Unsplash.

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GEOGRAPHIES

IN THE CROOK OF MY ELBOW

By Katie Hart Potapoff

The word “meander” has several meanings: it can mean “to walk slowly without any clear direction,” or it can mean “to move forward without any clear purpose.” Geographers use it to mean “a bend in the river.” The word comes from the Menderes River, located in present-day Turkey, and known by ancient peoples as a

winding and twisting river with slow-moving curves, bends, and backwaters.[1] I think about this as I note that for nearly four decades, various rivers—and the large bodies of water they feed—have shaped my life. A few of these rivers have flowed in and through my life story, washing up and against my forbearers, and others have



‘Crook of My Elbow’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.

meandered through the background, setting the flowing pace of change and continuations in my narrative. In the following piece, I combine my various forms of writing—prose and poetry—and artwork, to evoke, separately and together, the way that rivers shape my life.[2]

a shiver begins at the top of my head
running down into the shoulder
past the bend of the elbow
towards the tips of my fingers



‘Crook of My Elbow’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.

Winding, flowing, moving from the confluence of the Rivière des Rocher and Peace River, the Slave River in the Northwest Territories of Canada is anything but “directionless.” Featuring four sets of whitewater rapids—Cassette, Pelican, Mountain Portage, and Rapids of the Drowned—the Slave River is famous for challenging kayakers and canoeists. But I am tumbling and racing ahead of myself, river-like.

My own story begins with the rapids on the Slave River, with my parents meeting because of a proposed dam project that would have ruined the bird breeding grounds. My mum had just moved

to a small town near the river and was making an eight-foot pelican costume to wear at the Jam the Dam protest; my dad was the only one in town with a hot glue gun to put together the headpiece. It was also his 1975 red and white quarter-ton Ford pickup that drove my mum, in all eight feet of her pelican glory, down to the protest site.

marking the vast distance

bearing witness to the passage of time

my hands roll gobbets into spheres



‘Crook of My Elbow’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.



‘Crook of My Elbow’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.

At a young age, I moved with my family to the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. For the next sixteen years we lived by water: first next to the Arrow Lakes, then Carpenter Creek which feeds into Slocan Lake, and finally at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers. These waters are linked to my childhood and family memories. They saw me through learning to swim, developing the art of skipping stones, practicing my J-stroke while canoeing to campsites, sketching by the water, beachcombing for hours, feeling a summer full of first love and healing the eventual heartbreak that follows.

fist over heart

holding tight too

a tightening in my chest

When I moved away to attend university, I landed on the shores of Okanagan Lake. With much of my time spent indoors, the water was never really a consideration other than an antidote to scorching hot summer days. Maybe because the lake is wide and long, I never felt embraced in the same way I had by smaller and colder bodies of water.

the crevice made in the crook of my elbow is a place of rest

resting, breathing, waiting

a long wait

longing for this wait to be over

‘When I followed my family to the confluence of the Bow and Elbow Rivers in Alberta, I never expected to stay for long, let alone a whole decade. Much of that time was spent next to the low and slow meanderings of the Elbow River, so shallow in places it would barely reach your ankle bone. Midway through my time living at this confluence we experienced the aftermath of a torrential downpour: the rivers rose and flooded

a large portion of the downtown area. I, alongside many other residents, had to evacuate for higher ground. It was weeks before I was able to return. Although the flood missed my home by a mere 20 feet—while the houses on the other side of the street had to drain their basements—I still remember how traumatic it felt to watch those waters rise and then wait as they eventually sank back down. The greys and browns of the swirling, swollen river water churned and swept mud away, along with any sense of security the walls of a home offered.

way markers

bearing the marks of my skin

wearing the impression of intensifying pressure

Four of the five Indigenous languages spoken in this region name this place using a word that refers to the major bend in the path of the river, the Elbow.[3] When I looked up the word “elbow” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I found that it is not only used to refer to the “outer part of the joint between the fore and the upper arm,” but that elbow can also be used to refer to any major jag in a river or pathway.[4] This had me considering the different ways we name places of significance: sometimes by geographical indicators, but more often by the names of explorers or their patrons.

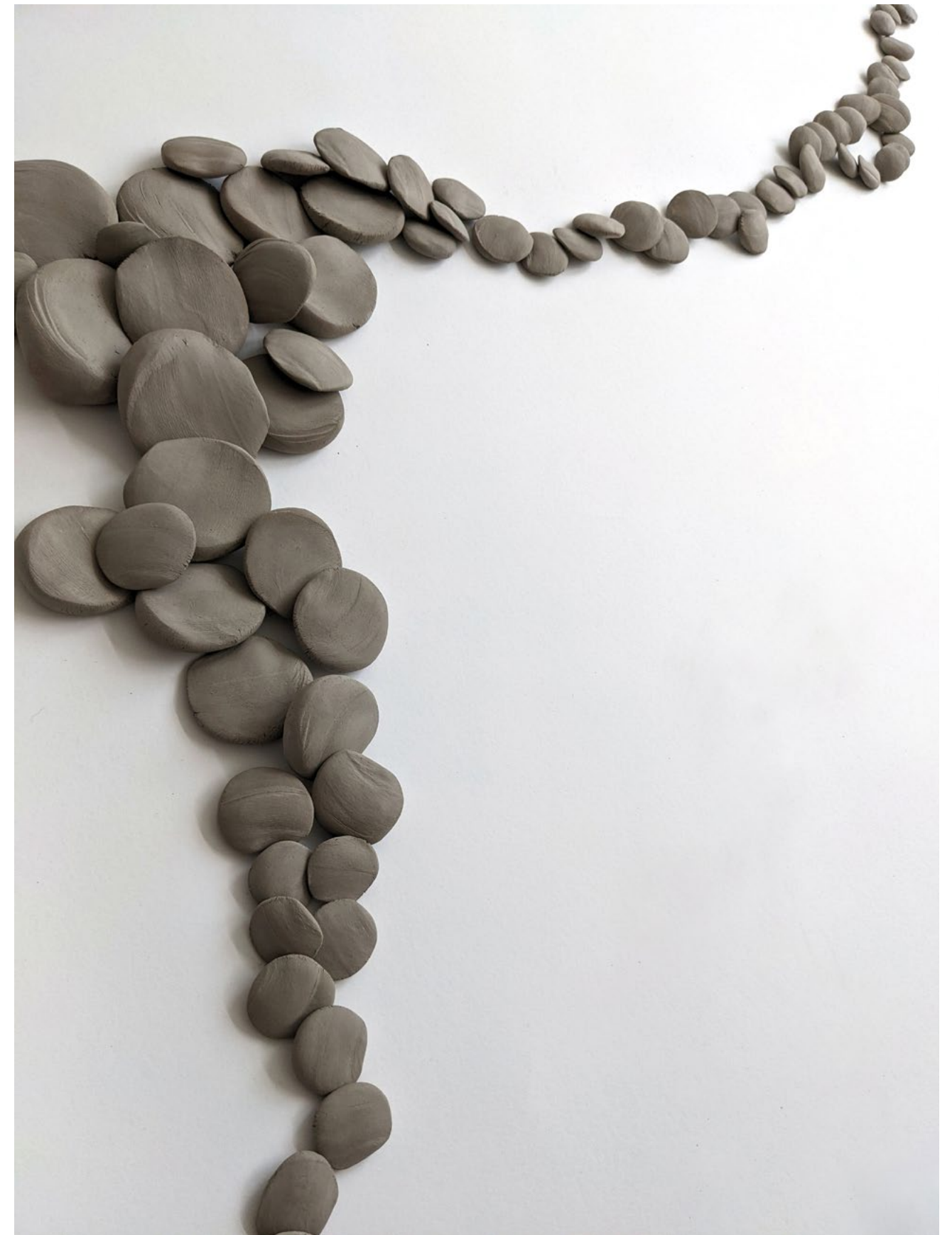
the word rolls and eddies over my tongue like the river it names

subtle imprints of the human form

traces of motion

repetition bruises both the body and soul

The settler name for the area at confluence of the Bow and Elbow Rivers shares both a reference to water and a link to Scotland, where I am currently



‘Crook of My Elbow’ courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.

writing this meandering narrative. When the settlement situated at the confluence was still only a fort, Col. Macleod of the North-West Mounted Police suggested a Gaelic word that he proposed meant “clear running water.”[5] While this word held personal significance from his recent visit to a familial farm of the same name on the Isle of Mull, it was later pointed out by language specialists that it would have translated as “preserved pasture at the harbor,” or “bay farm.”[6] This is a curious coincidence, as I wonder about the possibility that my great grandfather MacDonald, who moved from his post in India to farm next to the Elbow River, might have made the Gaelic connection and considered it a piece of home.

the lump that turned into a sphere is now an impression

cast with the traces of the crook in the elbow

a stone to be cast into water where the two

rivers meet

a place I call home

the place that is waiting for me

This link to Scotland brings me much closer to where I am currently sitting, writing these words in a sunny studio looking out on the River Tay as it flows into the largest body of water I have ever lived near: the North Sea. I hadn't really considered how implicitly my life has been linked to these creeks, rivers, and lakes; while I don't know if I could ever live so far from the sea again, there is something unique about the freshwater of a river.

form which is dictated by the topography, and yet

continues to shift geography

cutting through otherwise immovable rock

creating links between bodies of water

rivers have shaped my life and continue to shift my future

View video here: 'A Life Lived by Rivers' courtesy of Katie Hart Potapoff.

Footnotes

[1] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “meander, n.,” Oxford University Press, last modified December 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/115444; *Britannica*, s.v. “Menderes River,” last modified November 13, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Menderes-River>. The ancient name for the river was Maeander.

[2] Through interweaving threads of prose and poetry with images of visual practice, this experimental work offers a performative and reflexive response to this issue's theme of rivers as meaning. The form of the writing gestures to the Haibun, a combination of prose and haiku originating in Japan, that is often used in describing travels through a landscape. Through the numerous iterations of the artist/author's engagement with this material, she hopes to offer the reader multiple points of entry into an embodied experience.

[3] Meg Wilcox, “7 Names for Calgary Before it Became Calgary,” *CBC News*, December 3, 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-names-elbow-1.3345967>.

[4] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “elbow, n.,” Oxford University Press, last modified June 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/60163>.

[5] City of Calgary Archives, “Planting the Seed to Name Calgary,” *The City of Calgary Newsroom*, February 25, 2019, <https://newsroom.calgary.ca/planting-the-seed-to-name-calgary/>.

[6] The Glenbow Museum, “How Calgary Got its Name,” *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*, September 27, 1999, <https://www2.smo.uhi.ac.uk/gaidhlig/aite/Canada/calgary.html>.

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About the Author

Katie Hart Potapoff (she/her) is a multidisciplinary artist and writer based at DJCAD, University of Dundee, completing her practice-led Ph.D., titled “With an Attentiveness Towards Intimacy and Texture: Exploring a Sense of Land and Place Through Creative Practices.” Her research takes a non-hierarchical approach, attempting to interweave multiple perspectives, materials, and theories. At the center of her practice is a desire to create work which invites humans to reconsider relationships with their more-than-human kin. Katie was recently awarded an Explore and Create grant from the Canada Council for the Arts to fund her place-based residency on the Isle of Iona and she is currently the AHRI Research Fellow for the Centre for Scotland's Land Futures. Her website is www.katiehartpotapoff.com.