

Adventures in Habitat

An Urban Tale¹

Follow the project far enough to surprise yourself. Then go back to it. Be patient and relentless. Dream. Surprise yourself again.
—Laurie Ricou, “Out of the Field Guide: Teaching Habitat Studies”

A black shape leaps, plummets twelve storeys, ripples down windows, spirals and wavers, pulls up short, flies back to the top of the building and leaps again. No one notices. No one sees the body-head bop before the dive, no one hears the guttural call among Vancouver’s urban corridors—how the sound scrapes through the traffic and construction on Davie Street. No one sees the murder of Northwest crows that appears and chases the bird down Hornby Street, headed toward the answering call of another raven. Their ears plugged into, eyes and thumbs locked onto smartphones, iPods, and mp3 players, pedestrians pass me by, shoulder check me; their bags knock my hips. No one notices.

When people think of cities, they commonly think of concrete, theatres, high-rises, sidewalks, nightclubs, shopping malls, vacant-eyed and fast-paced pedestrians, cars and buses clogging narrow streets. In such built habitats, Neil Evernden’s claim resonates: “genuine attachment to place for humans [is] very difficult” (“Beyond” 101). If we continue framing his proposal in relation to cities, his point offers a useful way of thinking about our relationship with the nonhuman world. He claims that humans are “nicheless” species; their way of living excludes them from participating in an ecosystem’s natural processes. What he means by nicheless is that, as a species, we have fallen out of our ecological and evolutionary contexts. Instead, with the aid of technologies, we shape these contexts to meet our needs. We are “capable of material existence,” but we lack the capacity to commit to “an organic community” (*The Natural* 110) as co-extensive and

coevolving. With this disassociation, we lose our capacity to understand and live within a place's regenerative limits (carrying capacity) (*The Natural* 109).

Cities thus framed maintain an illusion of separation from local sustaining biophysical processes. Evernden proposes that if we attend to how other organisms function in and sensorily engage with a territory, we create potential to understand what it means to be *human* and find more sustainable ways of reinhabitation. As we are creatures who tend to be omnivorous, and to live in excess of our habitat's carrying capacity, he suggests we may realize our embodied limits through comparison with another creature's inhabitation of our shared environment. Yet, in a city under a constant influx of noise and disruption, where our senses diminish and nature seems invisible or nonexistent, such a task seems nearly impossible, some may argue futile. What organisms would we study? Pigeons, starlings, raccoons, jackrabbits, dandelions? And, how would studying rock pigeons in Vancouver, or jackrabbits in Edmonton, for instance, open interconnections between individuals, communities, and urban living? What if those non-human city dwellers, like many of us in Canada, are invasive or introduced species, living and shaping the environment through similar opportunistic strategies? These questions, I realize, have no singular answer, as each encounter with the nonhuman predicates a different response based on its species: some residents endorse empathetic cohabitation, while others incite zeal reminiscent of mobs with pitchforks and torches. Very few turn those questions back on themselves. Though, I have no singular answer, I adapt my critical enquiry to correspond to the cultural and material diversities of cities. In this particular urban tale, my narrative structure becomes an exploration of complementary modes of reception and expression of this diversity; it shifts between the collective, cultural, personal, and scholarly. At times these shifts seem abrupt. But, as with moving through a city, these paths of enquiry force unexpected turns that often lead to unanticipated connections.

A pluralistic approach is fundamental to ecological urban living as it enables an apprehension not just of a city's ecology as a whole, but also of an individual's interaction as part of an urban collective that includes the non-human. Without learning to grasp the ways in which urbanites and the biophysical world interact within these spaces, we will always struggle to see cities as anything but environments shaped by humans. Of course, this claim is a well-rooted and flourishing sentiment in the environmental humanities. But, that is my point: it seems this growth has little reach beyond

environmental criticism. And so, while the notion that we ought to pay closer attention to the human and non-human interactions of place remains a truism among eco-critics, the crux is that it persists as a novelty or does not register at all to a wider population who are marginally or not invested in environmental issues.

Our inability to recognize the biodiversity, may be as David Suzuki suggests, because cities are “human-created habitat[s] that [are] severely diminished in biological diversity. Our surroundings are dominated by one species—us—and the few plants and animals that we decide to share space with or cannot quite eliminate. In such an environment, it becomes easy to think that our creativity has enabled us to escape the constraints of our biological nature” (13). Yet, I wonder if Suzuki, caught up in the movement of the city crowd, lost sight of his surroundings. If he walked by the lots overrun with Himalayan blackberry and Morning Glory. And, if he glimpsed these spaces, he dismissed them as enclaves of weeds and invasive species. If he did not see the varied thrush and finches foraging among the plants. Or perhaps, if he stopped for a moment, when a “vacant” lot popped out, alive with orange California poppies, the midnight work of urban guerrilla gardeners. As with most human built environments, for millennia, cities have created niches for other species (exotic and native). Bridge girders and house attics have become nesting sites for birds and bats; sewers and basements take the place of field warrens; green belts, golf courses, and alleyways become wildlife corridors. In many cases, “we” do not “decide” and often cannot eliminate them, particularly those urban cohabitants that we deem pests or trash animals, such as raccoons or Norway rats.

What we need is a relational representational form of transgressive ecological literacy that collapses boundaries between genres, cultural differences, disciplines, partisan politics, and regions. An important step in creating such a literacy is to apprehend how another creature fits into, shares, and reshapes a world constructed by and for humans. For this endeavour, we need to turn to artistic forms that embody the complex interplay between the biographical (of human, nonhuman, place), the autobiographical (the personal) and material (biogeochemical) processes. Forms that cross the thresholds of common assumptions prompt thinking the unthinkable: that the species that inhabit urban green-spaces (orderly and disorderly) co-constitute urban environments through their own creative agencies and material interactions. Such a focus on (or return to) material and nonhuman processes enables an organic approach to cities. By focusing on the processes

of local cultural and material interactions that decentre human (self) for a shared *bios* (human and nonhuman life) in urban environments, ecological literacy offers that possibility. The insights of aesthetic and cultural narratives can help to shift assumptions and behaviours about what it means to be human and how we interact with the biophysical world. We can “intuit a connection” (Ricou, *Salal* 118) to engage and deepen perceptions of what constitutes the construction of place. We learn through creative endeavours, as Laurie Ricou advocates, by attending to “imagined habitat, a thicket of words, within which you read yourself into place” (*Salal* 118). In these habitats, we see what it means to dwell ecologically, to find our niche. If we follow Ricou’s suggestion, then creativity is not a constraint, but a method to work through the paradox of learning to live within our limits and push past our limitations. In order to see ourselves in relation to the nonhuman world, we need to keep ourselves simultaneously in and out of sight.

It is 2010, and I am three years into my PhD program. As Laurie Ricou, my MA supervisor, encouraged me to move to another city to do my final degree, I chose Edmonton. I grapple with this place, so different from Vancouver. The big sky, the muted browns, the short seasonal burst of greens, the dryness. The first thing I noticed driving into Edmonton, in 2007, was how the suburbs sprawl unchecked, about oil refineries and industrial lots. Since then, I have made many returns to the West coast. I tell Christine, another relocated Vancouverite who also frequently escapes west, that it’s all the salmon we ate growing up. They’ve altered our genes, filled our cells with a coastal homing urge.

But, this evening in 2010, I am not in Vancouver; I am in Edmonton. I stand in the Telus Theatre’s lobby, a glass atrium that overlooks a corner of University of Alberta’s north campus. I retrieve the letter from my satchel. I turn the sealed envelope over in my hand, read the sender’s address again. Though I am curious to know what Laurie has sent me, for now, I resist opening the letter. I move closer to and look out the window. It is early March and snow still falls. I look past my reflection, and peer out into the night, watch the students and faculty pass by. Something catches my attention, not a movement, but rather a practised stillness that contrasts with the other snow-covered clumps of bush that line the sidewalk. I lean closer to the glass, push my reflection further away: a white-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus townsendii*), wearing its winter white hunches between two shrubs. As the seasons change, so does their coat from grey to tan to white. These

hares always take me by surprise. When I notice pedestrians pass within inches without reaction or downward glances, I smile. I nearly trip on their frozen forms in both winter and summer. When I startle them, they do not so much hop away as run like squat, miniature deer weaving through parked cars and dumpsters, galloping down the middle of residential streets. The previous summer, while walking downtown, I stumbled across two huddled on the edge of a parking lot adjacent to City Centre Mall at 102 Street and 103 Avenue. Blocked in by office towers and 104 Avenue's six lanes, I wondered how they managed to end up here. And then, a week later, three blocks east on 106 Street, I disturbed one grazing on a narrow strip of grass. It bolted to a parking lot across the street, stopped against a white-stuccoed building, and pushed its body against the one, chipped spot of exposed concrete.

To understand the complex interplay of human and non-human relations, enquiry "has to start somewhere, it has to start with a specific" (Ricou, *Salal* 108). For Ricou, specificity begins with a local species or cultural artifact. So I began my journey through the local under the mentorship of a singular species that inhabited the Pacific Northwest. Through Ricou's ongoing teachings, I soon realized that local ecological investigation moved naturally into the realm of global concerns. Ecology was not just a study of local biogeochemical interactions; it was a globalized way of thinking. Though born and raised in British Columbia's lower mainland, I was shocked by how little I knew and had been educated about local histories, both cultural and natural. By reading the species' ecologies against wider human cultural and personal events, my perceptions of individual and collective local identities and affiliations have shifted. But, that shift also occurred through negotiating the interdisciplinary approach that Ricou advocated. For as I learned, *his* method was a loosely structured process of enquiry—with only a seeming hint of madness. The more forays I made into other disciplines, the more I felt my own disciplinary constraints loosening their fast hold; I became more open in my search, and eventually a method did emerge, one oddly compatible with my own patterns of thinking. As I listened to my species, my species began to guide me to the interconnections. Admittedly, it often made me feel frustrated, like I was running along the same pathways repeatedly, dropping down black holes, coming at things obliquely or with a disciplinary short sightedness. Despite these frustrations, though, the species led me always to surprising places. I began to hear a diversity and expression of agencies; I began to hear

myself—“ourselves”—in the voices of others, human and non-human. I began to imagine what another species sees in our form, hears in our voices, smells on our bodies, tastes on our breath, feels in our movements through its/our territories. And, then, while thinking these questions, the unexpected: I found a poem.

“Rat Song”

When you hear me singing
you get the rifle down
and the flashlight, aiming for my brain,
but you always miss

and when you set out the poison
I piss on it
to warn the others.

You think: *That one's too clever,*
she's dangerous, because
I don't stick around to be slaughtered
and you think I'm ugly too
despite my fur and pretty teeth
and my six nipples and snake tail.
All I want is love, you stupid
humanist. See if you can.

Right, I'm a parasite, I live off your
leavings, gristle and rancid fat,
I take without asking
and make nests in your cupboards
out of your suits and underwear.
You'd do the same if you could,

if you could afford to share
my crystal hatreds.
It's your throat I want, my mate
trapped in your throat.
Though you try to drown him
with your greasy person voice,
he is hiding / between your syllables
I can hear him singing.

(Atwood 32)²

“Rat Song” is one of ten poems in Margaret Atwood's series “Songs of the Transformed.” Animals sing their plight, their bitter insights, and their rage. They are fabulist turnings of human and animal that blur distinction between species, emphasizing clearly humanist constraints (and animal complaints). This poem is not a song in the classical sense; there is no

exaltation of the subject, no high praise. Instead, Atwood writes a visceral song of otherness— an irregular ode to human bestiality and bittersweet celebration of rat intelligence. She sings in a vernacular: vulgarity, violence, and insult. She sings in chords of “crystal hatreds”: discord.

The repeated patterns in “Rat Song” show how human obsession manifests as habituated ways of thinking and behaviour that sediment identity as “natural.” Atwood’s poem is not a song about a rat; it is a preoccupation of human self-interest. Sung from a rat’s perspective, however, the poem invites us to contemplate this obsession from our own animality. As the rat repeatedly voices “you” and “I,” she upsets the formal distance and distinction between subjects. This collapse of distance, coupled with the pronouns as indexical references, create both bound and unbound contexts and meaning. At first, “You” refers specifically to human/reader and “I” to rat/speaker. The title and action of the opening verse paragraph determine the distinction. However, the repetition—the obsessive and dizzyingly iteration—of “you” and “I” throughout the poem, subsumed and spoken by the reader’s own voice and joined with the rat’s litany of accusations undermines a clear division between the two species.

Then at the centre of the poem, hinges a flip-mirrored vision of human and rat: “humanist. See if you can,” sings the rat. This line, bookended by the poem’s first line, “When you hear me singing,” and the poem’s last line, “I can hear him singing,” divides the poem into action, accusation, thought, and subjunctives. The first half reveals how the human behaves and thinks; the second half, illustrates how the rat acts and what she sees, and desires. The word “humanist” drops down off an enjambment as both a declaration and pejorative that exclaims, “All I want is love, you stupid.” The blank space at the line-end causes pause, yet “stupid” finds not only a skin-crawling phonic echo in the repeated esses, but also an assonant emphasis (and echo of “you”) in the internal repetition of the “u” in “humanist.” The pause is further emphasized by its abrupt halt at a midline end-stop. The period trips up the rhythm, jumps a beat straight into another sibilant, the rat-hissed imperative and challenge “See if you can.” Intensified by the second end-stop in the line and its repetition of “you” and the vowel’s phonetic echoes in “stupid / humanist,” the rat’s contempt astounds. It is familiar in its resemblance to the loathing humans reserve for rats, and seems outrageous because it is directed at us. The effect of such recognition along with the poem’s formal constraints temporarily immobilizes the reader. The line’s two end-stops punctuate the anthropocentrism and speciesism that inevitably

will prevent the “humanist” from rising to the rat’s challenge, for as the term “humanist” maintains, human condition and values are the central concerns.

Though rat and human do not share similar physical attributes, the pronoun references unmoored from their antecedents amplify a merging of rat and human that evokes revulsion for both parties (“and you think I’m ugly too”—the inconceivable made plausible: “you” “too” are ugly to a rat). Human disgust and terror manifest in the various methods employed to exterminate the rat: gunshot, poison, and drowning. These methods intimate a level of barbarism that seems, for the size of the animal, out of proportion, inhumane, and further speaks to an escalating level of frustration. And from the rat’s cunning and ability to evade death, this is an almost absurd and futile human pursuit. A frustration the rat mocks in her declaration: “I don’t stick around to be slaughtered.” If read in the context of the abundance of historical and current rat narratives, through the line’s compounding of the present active voice to the infinitive, we hear in her song a promise of continued conflict between us and them.

The dare to you, I, to love her, “a parasite” that survives “off your / leavings, gristle and rancid fat” seems a deliberate sabotage to undermine any human attempt to rise to her challenge. Yet, the possibility of human affection perhaps never really was a possibility to begin with, only an imagining on our and her part: a performance of rat, of human. As readers, we sing aloud the rat’s words, and in doing so make them our words, our voices declaring, “I take without asking.” So no surprise, then, when the rat recognizes her mate’s song “trapped in your throat” drowned by “your greasy person voice,” she wants “your throat.” The forward slash that separates “he is hiding / between your syllables” offers a visual (and violent) cue and space for improvisation of the multiple (imagined and implied) meanings. We wonder where the rat hides: in human breath that creates the gaps that give form to words, make the rat intelligible, and thus evade capture. Or, in the pauses, the hesitations and limitations of “your” language, where she hears a rat. The slash, thus, becomes a humanist snare, a literal typographical snap-trap that forces “you” and “I” (human and rat) to sing together, hear the song, listen to the words, to be held in judgment by the other, to deem who and what is the beast.

I wonder if the rabbit looks back at me. It is too dark to see its eyes. I step back from the atrium’s window; the rabbit disappears into my reflection. The Telus Theatre’s foyer has filled near capacity. Eden

Robinson is the Kreisel Lecture speaker tonight. I walk up the stairs, then stop halfway. I flip the envelope over and tear open the flap. There is no accompanying note or letter, only a photocopy of a *Harper's Magazine* essay: Charles Bowden's "The Wisdom of Rats." I frown. Nearly eight years have passed since I wrote my Habitat Studies piece for Laurie's class. This unexpected essay without note of explanation seems abrupt. Randomly sent my way. Of course, I think, this has no ulterior motive. It is one more rat thing sent to me by a friend. I read the first line, "As a child I could not color within the lines" (13). My frown turns into a pinch. I feel a tap on my shoulder, turn: Dianne and Kate stand behind me. I stuff the essay and envelope back into my satchel, and continue to walk up the stairs. My brow relaxes. I smile, tap my bag.

My first encounter with Laurie was in his Canadian Long Poem undergraduate course at the University of British Columbia. After the first class, his gruff demeanour made me retreat from the front to the back row, and then to my advisor, Judy Brown, to ask why she had recommended I take his course. I explained how he walked in carrying a hard-shell briefcase, a grim set to his mouth. His first words to our class: "This is a course on poetry. We will be studying poems. So if you think studying poems is not for you, I suggest you leave." A few students did. After his impatience with my answers, I wondered why I too hadn't left. Judy only laughed and encouraged I drop by his office. So, I did. And, as we discussed radish seeds, gardening, and Robert Kroetsch's long poem *Seed Catalogue* for thirty minutes, he taught me a new way of reading (I discovered, too, when he made me look up the meaning of *radish*, that his briefcase contained only the *Canadian Oxford English Dictionary*). The next term, I enrolled in his English Majors Seminar on invasive species, a new direction in his Habitat Studies course, which normally focused on native Pacific Northwest flora and fauna.

His syllabus mentioned no required books, only a course description, expectations, a rough outline of the term, and a listing of species. Early on in the term, we left the classroom, and walked to a grassy area north of the UBC Anthropology Museum. We stopped under a Western red cedar, next to a tangle of Himalayan blackberry, the Salish Sea below us. Laurie rocked on his heels, scratched the top of his head, and held out a baseball cap filled with crumpled paper scraps. We'd been waiting for this moment: our "four month obsession." *English ivy. English ivy, please. English ivy. Please.* I unfurl

my paper. I turn to the young woman beside me, and I see the scrawl of ivy... “No swapping species,” Laurie calls out, looking at no one in particular. *Sweet Jesus.*

R*attus norvegicus*, also known as the Norway rat, brown rat, wharf rat, house rat, barn rat, common rat, grey rat, water-rat, sewer rat, Hanoverian rat (believed to have accompanied George I from Germany to England in 1714), the Friesen *ierdat* (earth rat), and *Wanderatte* (roving rat), is a commensal animal who essentially dines at the human table without contributing anything to the meal. Like most humans, the opportunistic rodent is omnivorous, which “gives these species a considerable edge when foraging” in major settlements (Garber 184). It thrives in the Northern Hemisphere. Habitats range from sewers, urban lakes, toxic land sites, landfills, alleys and lanes, university campuses, city parks, plazas, cellars, subways, rail yards, grain elevators, barns, haystacks, grain and corn fields, marshes, markets, demolition sites, under single-dwelling houses, apartments, derelict and condemned buildings, wharves, and shorelines. As its various names and its habitats suggest, the Norway rat is cosmopolitan and highly adaptive.

Much literature over the centuries has depicted Norway rats as war-hungry creatures that descend in hordes, scouring and colonizing new territories. For instance, Hans Zinsser in his work *Rats, Lice, and History* compares the Norway rat’s introduction to Europe: “just as established civilizations of Northern Europe were swept aside by the mass invasions of barbarians from the East, so the established hegemony of the black rat was eventually wiped out . . . [by] the ferocious, short-nosed, and short-tailed Asiatic” (199-200). A more probable and non-racist explanation, however, is found in the growing density and expansion of urban development. Wood shingles replaced thatch roofs, streets became common garbage tips, and underground sewers, water mains, and cellars opened up new harbourage sites for Norway rats, while black rats (roof and attic dwellers) saw their habitats shrinking.

The urge to read animals in humans and humans in animals, of course, is nothing new. Animals have been our fabulist mirrors for thousands of years: they are the flesh for many of our stories. In Canada, there are stories where the Norway rat and human relationship defies this generic category. In the coalmines of Nova Scotia, the miners regularly fed the Norway rats. The coal-blackened corner of bread where the miner pinched his sandwich was a standard meal for the pit rats. The miners’ treated them with deference, and

in some instances introduced them to the mines because their presence—or rather their absence—could save their lives. If the rats were absent from or seen exiting the mine, the miners knew to stay out or to follow; it meant that a bump or collapse was about to occur.³

For the most part, however, our stories dismiss rats as abominations. Too often, we focus on their consumption behaviours and overlook our own. As Gavan Watson contends, “we project our own neuroses about urban living onto [trash animals] that share the landscape with us. [They] come to represent the results of our contested urban living arrangements. What we find problematic with these [species], we should find problematic about our own city existence” (36). Watson’s observation emphasizes how the way we focus on these species’ colonizing tendencies reflects back onto our own colonizing attitudes and behaviours. Is Edmonton’s suburban sprawl east-, north-, west-, and southward any less invasive than the Norway rat’s spread across Vancouver’s cityscape? Whose habitats do we disrupt?

As urban sprawl and density grow, biota leave or die, stay or return and carve out a niche. Cities have their own natural habitats: eutrophic lakes, ponds, landfills, bogs, forests, parks, alleys, lanes, railway corridors, shorelines, abandoned factories and warehouses, empty lots, backyards, front yards, sidewalks, golf courses. Native and introduced species cohabitate in these spaces, some more dominantly than others. The disorderly or unconventional niches we categorize as eyesores. Often, though we do not necessarily welcome them, we come to accept them as inevitable characteristics of city landscapes, and so become inured to their presence. Eventually, as DJ Renegade haiku-raps, we rarely notice

Beside the dumpster
a rat drinking rainwater
from an eggshell

And then when we don’t see them, but their presence still encounters us: musk, scat, paw print, bones, feather, song. Despite their tenacity, their determination to share this environment with us, we remain, for the most part, determined to minimize their inhabitation. Sometimes this is for good reason, such as their potential for transmitting diseases and their potential threat to human well-being and property.

Yet, as Ricou persists, “Maybe we need to listen for another tongue, open to the possibility of the creature naming *us*” (“Out” 349). Though we may only ever imagine their songs of us, an ecological literacy that enables

us that imaginative capacity helps us to recognize *our* cultural practices. They have the power to translate the matter(s) hidden from us, to invite us underground, to burrow and emerge in startling places. Surprise us.

White Rock beach, British Columbia, summer, the early or mid-1970s. There is a mixed smell of raw sewage, brine, and sun-baked creosote. A dike keeps the BNR tracks above sea level and stops the tides from flooding Marine Drive. It's covered in basalt ballast, and shored up on the seaward side with granite boulders. Himalayan blackberries wend through the boulders. Culverts protrude from the dikes at random intervals, extending out to the foreshore. My brothers and I spend most of our summer days here, exploring the eight-kilometre stretch of sand and water that connects West and East beaches. Our mother, always well-stocked with cigarettes, magazines, and pulp novels, had her regular tanning spot on West beach. It was understood we were to wander off and play. A Coleman cooler filled with soggy tuna sandwiches, Old Dutch chips, and Pop Shoppe sodas ensured our return.

Most days, I would wander on my own, explore the tidal pools, pick blackberries, walk the underside of the pier, or make my way to East beach to where Little Campbell River emerged from the Semiahmoo First Nations Reserve. At high tide, I scrambled over the boulders. I was small and underdeveloped for my age, but fast and agile. I would leap from rock to rock without pause, a mountain goat, bare feet slapping granite. One particular day, I hesitated: a flicker of a tail. I hurried to where it had disappeared, only to see it re-emerge a few feet away, then, its brown flank a blur, dropped down another hole. I followed. I let my body slip head first down among the boulders, used my hands to pull me forward. The further I descended, the more space opened up. I saw a movement ahead; a face turned toward me, a backward glance. Eye contact. Then it continued onward, but at a slower pace. I followed, pulling and turning sideways through narrow tunnels. The rat's tail, a string in my sight, guided me, and led me eventually to daylight. I emerged a short distance from my entry-point, squirmed out of the opening, blinked, and startled a sunbather.

Subterranean dwellers, brown rats live in a network of tunnels with one or more nesting and feeding chambers, and multiple entryways. In British Columbia's Lower Mainland, they largely inhabit the waterfronts, but also reside in any building that provides accessible harbourage, regardless of the neighbourhood's demographic. The Norway

rat arrived in North America around the time of the War of Independence in 1775. In the early-nineteenth century, the brown rat followed human settlement, spread rapidly across the continent, up into British North America (BNA), and rapidly pushed out the black rat (Twigg 24). The lack of Old World parasites and diseases coupled with ideal living conditions, an omnivorous palate, and fecundity allowed populations to explode and expand from Florida to Newfoundland, from California to Alaska. In its movements across BNA/Canada, the Norway rat acquired a renowned history. As British colonists and migrant workers moved westward, they set up camps and built farming communities and grain silos adjacent to the trans-Canadian railway. These communities presented optimal commensal arrangements for the Norway rat. The Rocky Mountains would have been a natural deterrent for the rats, but in the 1950s, Albertans halted the brown rat's progress. Through an extensive rat control program, which involved public education and a heavy hand with shovels, guns, and Warfarin, they halted the westward migration of the Norway rat. Today, a small but dedicated rat program continues and ensures that rat infestations in Alberta remain few.

Not all Norway rats arrived in Canada by the East coast, though. By the 1850s, Norway rats had found their way into British Columbia by ships. According to an early-twentieth-century local naturalist, Allen Brooks, in 1887, the wharf rat was a common sight in Vancouver, New Westminster, and Victoria: [they] "swarmed at the three large seaports and along the coast" (68). However, though they were sighted as far as Chilliwack in 1894, near the east end of the Fraser Valley, the brown rats were and remain absent or scarce in the province's interior (BC Ministry of Environment n. pag.).

In 1918, Strathcona, one of Vancouver's first residential and industrial areas, abutted the False Creek mudflats that extended from English Bay to present day Clark Drive. At very high tides, its waters flooded into Burrard Inlet. Flowing down into the mudflats were 120 kilometres of salmon and cutthroat trout streams. From the 1880s to the 1950s, Vancouver's False Creek was the terminus for the CPR and the CNR. Sawmills and other industries occupied the land. Over this period, the city gradually filled in the Flats, forced streams underground, and built more industry. After World War I, however, Vancouver's temperate climate and the lure of potential work attracted a large influx of unemployed men. By the 1930s, a "hobo jungle" of tents and flimsily constructed shacks developed on the Flats, which housed approximately one thousand homeless men, many who were Great War veterans (Atkin 62). Vancouver's dump, near China Creek, was adjacent to

this shanty town. Raw sewage outfalls from the residential neighbourhoods and toxic pollutants from sawmills and industry also flowed into False Creek Flats. Despite the mixed semi-diurnal tides and the outflow from freshwater streams, the flats became “unsanitary, rat infested wastes” (Burkinshaw 40-41). This is not surprising, as *Rattus norvegicus* “has a tendency to dominate garbage dumps,” and inhibit the “establishment of potential colonizers”; its presence “sometimes become[s] considerable in those dumps where pest control is inadequate” (Darlington 93). Indicative of general sentiment and significant in Burkinshaw’s observation is his coupling of rats as a negative modifier of “wastes”: an oversight that does not distinguish how waste, in this context, as a product of human consumption creates the physical environment for rats to develop their niche.

John Crossetti, a resident of Vancouver’s Strathcona neighbourhood, recalls how, as kids, he and his friends used to go to this dump, a place “infested with rats . . . and try to kill [them] but . . . never got them” (qtd. in Marlatt and Itter 56). Yun Ho Chang, another resident, similarly relates, “I would stop for a few minutes and watch because these rats were all running around, dragging each other along by the tail. Some of them were as big as cats. Lots of other people watched too, it was a sort of rat theatre” (n. pag.). By the 1970s, the degraded state of the Flats initiated a clean-up of False Creek. Industries were pushed out, squatters removed, and Granville Island Market place was constructed. Nevertheless, because of the city’s failure over the decades to manage and control waste on Vancouver’s waterfronts, pest control proved inadequate. The Norway rats remained and thrived. In False Creek, Yun Ho Chang’s rat theatre continues today.

Taking time out to watch this rat performance, Ricou would propose, is a way-finding through getting lost in the ecological processes of your own backyard. “To listen,” he writes, “is to *wait*—patiently—for a sound to be absorbed, maybe to become a message. Perhaps to *heed*. Perhaps to listen *in on*” (“Out” 348-49). The next time you visit Granville Island, never mind the Arts Club Theatre. Purchase a coffee. Find a bench with a view of the boulders that line the shore, let your gaze roam randomly over the rocks, and eventually you will see a skittering flick, a scaly tail, popping heads, and a chase or boxing match. Their bodies “spines pulled in an inflexible / French curve, all haunch to keep their mouths / at the earth, licking dust” (Degen 28).

Anna Jorgensen claims that there is no clear distinction between “regulated and wild urban places: rather there is a continuum ranging from ‘wilderness’ to apparently ordered spaces, with different levels of wildness existing at

multiple different scales at each locality. In this sense, wildscape can be seen as an idea, a way of thinking about urban space, rather than a closed category that can be spatially located" (2). The rat's capacity to inhabit various urban harbourage sites, regardless of the economic location of the area, disrupts dichotomous assumptions of what constitutes a wild urban space. Is the space wild because an unpredictable, undomesticated species resides there? Is a rat colony in Vancouver's affluent Kerrisdale neighbourhood or UBC's campus less a wilderness site than a hotel in the city's Downtown Eastside? Or rather than thinking in terms of *wild* and *wilderness*, perhaps we should follow Laurie's suggestion and refer to them as habitats. A niche refers to *how* a species lives in relation to its habitat, which is the physical environment that a species inhabits (Callenbach 78). Habitat, thus, as Laurie proposes in a footnote, "has an amplitude that allows for all forms of living-in, including the cultural (that is, human) and imagined" ("Out" 363). As it attends to ecological interdependencies, habitat forces us to think relationally. We define *wild* and *wilderness* divisively, by what they are not: civilized, domesticated. Habitat's focus accentuates the complex interplay of movements that transgress and transform strict demarcations of boundaries.

In 2011, in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, developer Marc Williams had the Pantages Theatre, an old vaudeville heritage site demolished to make space for Sequel 138, a condominium development. After the demolition he did not clear the site, but left it as a holding ground for the debris and garbage; consequently, over the course of a year, it became an optimal habitat for Norway rats. Vancouver's *Global News* quotes one resident, Ben Smith, "If you're sitting at my window, and looking out, the ground moves. There are so many rats, the ground actually looks like it's moving" (McArthur and Meiszner n. pag.). Williams is part of a controversial push by Vancouver developers to gentrify the Downtown Eastside, one of Canada's poorest urban communities. Williams' plans for Sequel 138 include art and commercial space on the main floor, urban agriculture on the second level roof garden, 79 one-bedroom condos priced from \$227,000 and 18 social housing units (Werb n. pag.). In a public effort to shame both the city into issuing a clean-up order and Williams into taking responsibility for his waste, Downtown Eastside residents conducted a rat count on his lot, a parody of naturalist's backyard bird counts. Shortly after, the city intervened, and the site was cleaned up. The rats remained. The removal of the debris cleared the surface, but did not address the problem beneath.

The rat count is a form of ecological literacy: recognition of the interconnections between a seeming inescapable poverty, disregard of land use or maintenance, and degraded environmental and human health. Whether intentionally or not, by disregarding requests to clean the site and leaving the lot in such condition, Williams imposed the inescapable ecologies, which Linda Nash claims throughout her book *Inescapable Ecologies*, traps the disenfranchised in not just material locations but also in seemingly “naturalized” social categorizations. As Nash repeatedly illustrates, poor communities become local dumping grounds and locations for toxic industries and classist and racist policies. And, the rats, I add, become implicated too, caught in a circular logic: where there is poverty, there will be rats, where there are rats, there will be poverty. We recognize them as vectors of harmful disease and see this characteristic as inseparable from their habitats: wastelands, which tend to be located in economically suppressed areas. We fail to see the corresponding constructed cultural wasteland. We forget that we built these habitats through our neglect. The rat count made evident how out of neglect we produce, to borrow Kathleen Wallace’s observation, a “strange” practice of attaching dehumanizing *isms* with urban “environmental degradation [and] that are so pervasive that they seem natural” (72). An affluent developer cleared away his trash and debris (finally, after a year) in a Downtown Eastside neighbourhood; the rats remained.

Ecological literacy is about understanding the interrelations of *communities* as a complex interplay of human and nonhuman interactions. Investigating an animal’s niche alongside human ecologies opens up the complex material and cultural relations humans construct with other organisms within urban habitats. The rat tale is one I return to often. Their stories are ubiquitous; we like to write, read, and talk rats, cover the same ground repeatedly. I am no exception. But as Laurie insists, there are moments of surprise in these returns: I hear something new. Like Cape Breton pit rats. Or the rat count. Once the old Pantages Theatre lot became clear of Williams’ trash the site temporarily transformed into something unexpected: a raptor’s hunting ground (see Smith). Its presence makes me recall the ravens on Hornby Street and the jackrabbits by Edmonton’s City Centre Mall: their presence so *unnatural* among office towers because I clung to the wild. Their urban tales, often glimpsed only as shadows on concrete or flickers in glass, disrupt and challenge our

limitations, entice us to take out the ear-buds, power off the cellphones, look away from our mirrored reflections, and seek them out. They make us attend to a rat theatre.

NOTES

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- 2 “Rat Song” by Margaret Atwood, included by permission of the Author. Available in *SELECTED POEMS, 1966-1984*, published by Oxford University Press, ©Margaret Atwood 1990.
- 3 The story of pit rats I encountered on my tours of Spring Hill Mine and Glace Bay Mines in Nova Scotia.

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