

**Between Stories:**  
**The Agency of Story and Living Ways**

by

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CRITICISM AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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**Abstract**

Between Stories: The Agency of Story and Living Ways  
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This thesis is an exploration of the agency of stories, focusing on the question of *living story*. It employs Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, *The Storyteller*, as a primary lens of European origin, also looking at the role of story in Turtle Island Indigenous and Icelandic scholarship. The main outcome was a collaborative artist's bookwork titled *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*, which collects and curates stories by Elin Agla and myself; the project consisted of several additional components, including trips to Iceland, hosting people in my home in Toronto and an invitational feast. A reflection on contemporary societal conditions, *Between Stories: The Agency of Story and Living Ways* as a thesis provides a framework for considering paradigm shifts that affect the perception and relation to Story and stories.

## **Land Acknowledgement**

OCAD University acknowledges the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original owners and custodians of the land on which we stand and create.

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Elín Agla for keeping me tied to our relations and to Story.

## **Dedication**

For my makers and those that have been made through me.

And for my Laburu: Javier, Carm and Mika

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## Preface

In my 30-year practice as an artist I have often engaged with processes that can be seen as curatorial. I have selected and gathered together existing elements that I encountered in the world, developed a relationship with these elements through fabrication processes or re-presentation, and constructed conditions of exhibition or display that allowed a particular story to be told or seen by an audience. For many years I have described myself as a multi-media installation artist who investigates the mechanisms of cultural representation and their silent influence over our perceptions of the world. Through site-specific installations, exhibitions and public commissions, I have aimed to bring renewed intimacy to the act of looking while raising questions about issues of authenticity, appropriation, reproduction, collection, and display.

One of my more recent installations, *Lost in the Wood* (2014), was both a sculpture and a functional dining space that random visitors to the gallery could employ for gatherings. It was a platform for social interaction, celebration, and communication. In this case I designed the functional structure within which a curatorial impulse could play out. Members of the public could bring together a group of people in a creatively charged and unique environment with a particular intention in mind. The full realization of the artwork depended upon the participation of others and it was left up to chance as to how and by whom this might happen. While the space was designed to encourage the sharing of food as the catalyst of the gatherings, visitors employed *Lost in the Wood* for this and more, producing events from tattoo parties to rug hooking workshops.

In this thesis, I actively extended and emphasized this curatorial approach. Titled *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*, the project consisted of several components—trips to Iceland, hosting people in my home in Toronto and an invitational feast—that all revolved around the collecting and curating of stories by Elín Agla and myself, published as an artist book. The primary participant, Elín (I use her first name because this is a deeply personal project), is a cultural practitioner who, while not presenting herself as an artist, cultivates Story and stories in her lived relationships with human, non-human and unseen entities. Many other voices were brought into the larger project, including contributors to the book, chefs, servers, singers, storytellers and listeners at the events, and all of those whose presence was spoken to and felt in, and outside of, the various spaces we inhabited over many months. In this way, my project, particularly the event-based practices such as the feast, triggered associations with relational avant-garde practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Futurism, Situationist practices, Fluxus works, Happenings, Performance Art and Relational Aesthetics. These practices pushed against the authoritarian, capitalistic, frameworks of the art system and made social and daily life the site of creativity.

In many respects, this project attempted to erode the notion of audience, to practice *living story* as an attunement to and welcoming of the mystery and ambivalence that swirls when many entities are invited to be at the table and are shown that their active presence is absolutely necessary. Curation, here, became a practice of discernment and courtship, a practice of invitation and hosting, a practice of listening for what was

needed and providing the space and conditions for it to show up. Curation was practiced as an ally to *living story*.

It is curious to see that the thesis contained here does take note of Walter Benjamin's observation that one of the effects of World War I was to silence the storyteller, that the places of making, prior to industrialization allowed stories to be told and heard, and that, with the machine age, much of this was lost. That many of the relational art movements of the last century aimed to counteract the effects of war and industrialization is interesting to consider. The longing and desire to see ourselves in, of and with Story are evident within most of these human endeavours and, in this way, the kinship among artists and curators is fundamental and undeniable.

The bookwork and related events that comprised my curated thesis were about *remembering*—remembering practices of living that were embedded in stories and storytelling, in the ways in which stories uniquely capture culturally specific contexts and events. This project aims to return not to the same time or place that is remembered, but to a way of living that is embedded with remembering, in which one can see that ancient time and place out of the corner of one's eye and within the arc of Story and stories.

What remains as a central, tangible, testament to my curatorial project is the *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* bookwork. Here, I curated a collection of stories related to my ancestry, personal experience, and lived condition. These were compiled alongside Elin's writings in an experimental structure which is dialogic and focused very pointedly on creatively arranging an experience for the reader. Triggered by the realization that the Icelandic word for the *spine* of a book is the *keel*, I came to see the construction of the

book as boat-like, with a series of story-ribs, connected along a central keel-spine, which orients the direction of movement. Together, these form a hull that allows the word-vessel to float and be functional. Having said this, I came to see the boat as leaky, in that it is not a sealed-up narrative that tightly and succinctly renders a tale. Rather, it contends with a reckoning and a wrestling that includes many voices and embraces drift and porosity. One hundred copies of *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* were printed and one third of these have accompanied Elín back to Iceland. We now stand in the wake of its making and are curious to see what it will carry.

## Introduction

Stories and Story form the heart of humanness. The first is our capacity to communicate a narrative in the dynamic relationship between the teller and those present to the telling. The second is our ability to see ourselves *in, with* and *of* Story—an animate entity that affects lived realities. Between these two, a third element swirls—the profound and mysterious dance between what we say and what we see, between the stories we articulate and privilege and the cultural conditions we inhabit.

This thesis project is rooted in my longing to hold stories and a deep desire to practice a way of learning and living that has Story in mind. Fertile ground for this was found in relationship with Elín Agla, a Vernacular Culture Farmer living in Árneshreppur County, Iceland. Vernacular Culture Farming is a practice of *living story* that is addressed in more depth in this paper. Together we have published *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* as a vessel to hold stories, nurture Story, and invite storytelling. We have also co-hosted several events in my home in Toronto to introduce the publication and make space for Story and stories.

This text, while including references to Elín Agla and practices of vernacular culture farming, is a broader exploration of the agency of stories and the role of Story in living ways. It explores the Story of stories and builds a framework for wondering what Story is becoming.

## The Agency of Story in Three Contexts

### I

One of the fundamental qualities of humanness is the ability to tell stories. Yet being in the presence of a skilled storyteller is a rare occurrence in many contemporary lives. In the opening of his 1936 essay *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*, German Jewish philosopher, cultural critic and essayist Walter Benjamin laments the decline of storytelling as a lived art form. “Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly.” He states, “More and more often there is an embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.”<sup>1</sup> Benjamin points to a theft that has taken place—to storytelling having been stolen from us—and, in the context of his German origins and life in Paris where he was living at the time he wrote this essay, this ‘us’ is situated in a European and Western framework.

Fractures in human experience in the European/Western context led to a decline in the ability to communicate experiences orally. “Experience has fallen in value,” Benjamin writes. “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?” He goes on to say that “experience has been contradicted” by the strategic forces of warfare,

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1. Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations*. ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 83

economics and power that have left the “tiny, fragile, human body”<sup>2</sup> in a world vastly changed by destructive forces. Experiences of the first decades of the 20th century, particularly the First World War, eventually came to be written in books because the horrors experienced were *unspeakable*.

With the evolution of the middle class in capitalistic times, the printing press became a tool that enabled the proliferation of *information*. Close at hand, verifiable, and “understandable in itself,”<sup>3</sup> Benjamin writes, access to information allowed one to negotiate immediate understanding. Intelligence that had once come from a spatial or temporal distance and thus “possessed an authority that gave it validity,”<sup>4</sup> now came under scrutiny. *Information* and *explanation* are “incompatible with the spirit of storytelling.” Benjamin states. “If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.”<sup>5</sup> We are rich in news but poor in powerful stories because everything is “shot through with explanation” leaving little space for the readers to wrestle with their own interpretation and understanding. Information and story have differing relationships to time. Information is akin to the ticking of a clock. “It lives only in the moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself without losing any time.” Benjamin contrasts this with the story, which “does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.”<sup>6</sup> While stories sometimes

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2. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 84.

3. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 89.

4. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 89.

5. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 89.

6. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 90.

feel dry and illogical, even quirky in their stiltedness, they contain seeds that remain viable for generations.

## II

Stories can communicate nuanced and complex aspects of cultural identity, social structures, and human and non-human relations. Indigenous peoples in the North American context have made it resoundingly clear that stories are powerful and important carriers of knowledge. As Cherokee-Greek author, Thomas King, famously reiterated in each of his 2003 Massey lectures, “The truth about stories is that’s all we are.”<sup>7</sup> He described stories as both “wondrous” and “dangerous” because of their ability to construct and destruct human perceptions and, in turn, affect lived realities. There are many stories that we are exposed to in our lifetimes, he shows us, and we make choices about which ones we privilege. King concludes each of his storied lectures with the statement: “Take it. It’s yours. Do with it what you will. [...] But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now.”<sup>8</sup> King provocatively demonstrates the responsibility carried both in the telling, reception, and repetition of stories. The stories we choose to embrace have an important impact on what and how we think and live.

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7. Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 2.

8. King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, 151.

In *Dancing on our turtle's back*, Michi Saagiig author and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes how the Nishnaabeg Creation Stories provide the ontological context from which Nishnaabeg people can “interpret other stories, teachings, and experiences.”<sup>9</sup> In the community these stories are told again and again, often by the Elders, so that throughout one’s life an understanding and enactment of the teachings they contain can deepen. The stories are encoded with the knowledge that enables each person to “*be* their own Creation Story.” “Storytelling then becomes a lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism,” Simpson writes, “where we can create models and mirrors where none existed, and where we can experience the spaces of freedom and justice.”<sup>10</sup> In the Indigenous context, the integrity of stories and storytelling must be maintained as they are alive, transformative, and vital.

Simpson calls storytelling an “emergent practice.”<sup>11</sup> The storyteller and listeners collectively generate a plurality of meanings which resonate differently in each individual. It is understood that the storyteller is revealing knowledge gained through direct experience, things that they know to be true, and that the story’s meaning becomes “heart-knowledge” only when echoed in one’s life experience. One has to “live the knowledge in order to know it” and this can take years.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on our turtle's back: stories of Nishnaabeg re-creation, resurgence, and a new emergence* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2011), 32.

10. Simpson, *Dancing on our turtle's back*, 33.

11. Simpson, *Dancing on our turtle's back*, 104.

12. Simpson, *Dancing on our turtle's back*, 104.

In Nishnaabeg culture it is understood that stories are not only heard by humans. The land retains the sounds of the stories that have been heard over generations and echoes them back. If the stories and teachings are not lived, Simpson emphasizes, these echoes become faint and ultimately disappear. “The more we tell stories, the more stories there are to tell, the more echoes that come up to the present.”<sup>13</sup> Simpson writes. Telling the stories maintains the web of relations and, in turn, a “collective consciousness” that holds families and nations together.<sup>14</sup>

### III

In the Icelandic context, we can find another variation on the agency of stories in culture. The Sagas, as they are commonly referred to, are Norse and Icelandic prose and poetry that belonged to oral culture during Pagan times and were recorded by Christian scribes in the 13th Century, more than 200 years after Iceland’s conversion to Christianity in 1000 CE.<sup>15</sup> One of the reasons the Christians preserved the Pagan Sagas was to maintain knowledge of the *kennings*—multiple word phrases which stood in for single words or names and provided metaphorical meanings in poetic descriptions.<sup>16</sup> An example of a kenning is the compound word ‘whaleroad’ to mean ‘ocean’. Characters and gods had multiple names formed by kenning—in the case of the God Oðinn there are over 50 ways in which he can be named. Thus, maintaining the Pagan Sagas secured

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13. Simpson, *Dancing on our turtle’s back*, 105.

14. Simpson, *Dancing on our turtle’s back*, 105.

15. Jackson Crawford, Introduction to *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co, Inc. 2015, ix

16. Crawford, Introduction to *The Poetic Edda*. xviii

access to the language of poetry and prose and, by extension the stories of the place and its people. Of all the Scandinavian languages Icelandic is the closest to Old Norse and the lyrical complexity of its use today is a testament to the aliveness of this legacy.

While Iceland has been connected to Europe throughout history, it has developed fierce cultural independence, partly in reaction to the oppression of the Danish rule it was under for hundreds of years. Icelanders consider the Sagas, and the practices of the ancient bards and storytellers who wrote them, to be their crowning contribution to world culture. Icelandic writer and poet Bergsveinn Birgisson received his doctorate in Nordic Studies from the University of Bergen and is passionate about the role the Sagas have played in forming the Icelandic identity. Birgisson organized an archaeological conference in Selströnd, Iceland, in August 2018 and invited Elín Agla to address those gathered. In response to her brief, but impactful, speech Birgisson wrote the following:

(Elín Agla) spoke about remembering and not forgetting, and how her work is dedicated to those two things, [...] The big task in it is in accordance with the only grande thing our culture has ever created and gifted to world culture. I am speaking about the ancient bards and storytellers who wrote, for example, the Icelandic sagas, for the greatness in their work was that they refused to forget the ways of their ancestors despite living in a completely new world view and thinking. They did not write binary romances about the evil pagans and the good Christians, like the rest of Europe was doing at that time until Don Quixote. [...] I will let it suffice to

name the ancient ethics that “sinn eld skuli hver ábyrgjast”/ each person is responsible to look after their fire and the old Vyrð belief (Örlagatrú). [...] they understood that the world is where one’s self is and that the work of a great artist and shaman in each culture is to try to hinder the RIFT that happens when grande changes take place in culture and in thinking: to remember on behalf of your people.<sup>17</sup>

Birgisson articulates that the Icelandic storytelling traditions have survived because the ancient ways were not abolished in times of change. Doing so, in this context, would result in abandoning the memory of some of one’s ancestors, perhaps the ones who refused conversion. Instead, the Sagas embraced ambivalence or polyvalence, provoking ongoing discussion, debate and imaginative supposition about their meanings. As a result, the Sagas and storied language have remained central to the Icelandic culture.

The Icelandic context provides an example of the relationships between storytelling, non-human entities, and the communicability of human experience that triangulates, and thus complicates, conversations that compare and contrast Indigenous and Western/European views on these topics. While drawing populations primarily from the Scandinavian and Celtic regions, the ‘settlers’ of Iceland made home in a place that had extremely scant human inhabitation at the time, yet they removed the dragon-prows of their ships for fear of disturbing the *Landvættir* (Land-Spirits)—guardians of particular places or countries.<sup>18</sup> Most of Iceland’s 330,000 inhabitants can trace their lineage back

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17. Bergsveinn Birgisson, Statement written in communication with Elín Agla. August 9, 2018.

18. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald, eds, *The Viking Age: A Reader*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2014. 68

to 870-930 CE so the web of relationality within the culture and country is extremely strong. The Sagas contain and sustain these relations.

### **Living Story, Grounded Normativity, and Daily Life**

#### **I**

Elín Agla has chosen to live in Árneshreppur County, Iceland, because of an old-time understanding of story's relationship to life that has appeared for her there. Her practice of vernacular culture farming developed out of a commitment she made to be *in* and *with* the story of Árneshreppur. She describes vernacular culture farming as consisting mostly of “having coffee and meals with the local people, learning and listening to their stories, and slowly being introduced to the rhythm of this culture and the ancestry of the place.” She speaks of her willingness to be “tutored by the story as it is unfolding” and “give herself up into the story so she [the Story] can continue and grow and unfold in the ways of herself.”<sup>19</sup> In Elín Agla's way of being, story is a living, animate entity and daily life is lived with Story in mind.

In grappling with communicating the practice of vernacular culture farming, Elín and I came to use the term *living story*. We think of *living story* as an animate entity that

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19. Elín Agla, “To Remember by Doing: A Case for Mystery in the Age of Enlightenment,” August 18, 2018, Excerpt from a speech given at the “Landnámsbær fundinn á Seltrönd” (Settlement found on Seltrands) Archaeological Conference, Hveravík á Ströndöm, Iceland.

is cultivated by having story in mind in how one looks, listens or speaks. *Living story* is supported by human acts of making that activate embodied relationships with the physical world. *Living story* is a way of being that recognizes exchange as integral to the fluidity of life. While part of this exchange may include storytelling itself, *living story* is not about voicing existing narratives, per se. It is about living in such a way that one sees oneself *in* and *of* a story and, in turn, recognizes a sense of agency, influence, and responsibility in how the story is tended to as it unfolds. Story is uncontrollable, but by keeping story in mind and building an awareness of the web of relations that connects all levels and layers of existence *living story* is practiced. When practices of *living story* are cultivated, our relationships with each other and the places we live in are deepened and enriched.

The following story attempts to depict *living story*. It was written in remembrance of my first morning in Árneshreppur County:

### *HANNA OF GJÖRGUR*

*June 6, 2018. Norðurfjorður, Árneshreppur County, Iceland*

*The first morning I awoke in Norðurfjorður the light was as bright as when I had gone to sleep. I raised the blind of the bedroom window and my heart sank to discover the port was almost empty; I had missed all the action of the fishermen heading out for the day. They leave at 4 am, I later learned, some of them sleeping on their boats to enable a timely departure. It was early June and the fishing season was in full swing.*

*I found Elin in the Fish House, preparing the vats of ice in anticipation for the fishermen's return. The job she had undertaken as Harbour Master had required she get her forklift license and I could see she had become impressively adept at managing the stacks of large plastic bins waiting to receive the catch. The day*

*was sunny and enjoyably calm. Everyone was going about their work, soaking up the solace of busy, light-filled, summer life in the remote north.*

*As I circled the tiny harbour I noticed Hilmar readying his boat, Hanna. Hilmar and I had made our introductions the day before when some troubles with Hanna's battery had kept him from fishing for the day. I had approached and he had welcomed a chat. His English was surprisingly good and he responded delightedly to the mention of Canada. "Yes, yes," he said. "I've been to Canada! I visited my family in Gimli many years ago." With this he proudly held up a tiny plastic bottle that had once held Canadian Maple Syrup. "It's full of Irish Whisky now," he chuckled. Unscrewing the cap, he passed it to me. "Have a sip," he urged. And I did.*

*I squatted dockside along Hanna watching while Hilmar set about the task of reconnecting the wiring. "I'm getting too old for this," he proclaimed. "My knee is bad and I need to get it fixed. This boat is very old too. So much of her has been rebuilt over the years there might only be one original board left. My father bought her and restored her and here I am, 78 and still fishing." I offered to bring Hilmar a coffee and he smiled. "Yes, yes. That would be very nice."*

*Kaffe Norðurfjorður is run by Lóvís and Sara, two women from Reykjavik who serve the community in the summer months when traffic in the village makes the operation viable. As Lóvís prepared my order, I explained that the coffee was for Hilmar and she lit up. "He's the oldest fisherman in Iceland and that is the smallest fishing vessel going," she stated. "That's really true." I delivered the coffee to Hilmar and wished him well in his labours, leaving him to focus on the task at hand.*

*So, circling around the port the next morning, I gestured a hello to Hilmar, realizing that he was leaving the port later than the other fisherman, but nonetheless getting on his way. From the pier Elín gestured as well, both to him and to me, and called out, "Maybe you should go fishing with Hilmar!" Hilmar circled Hanna around. "I am happy to have you come along," he agreed, "but I don't have insurance for you. I have it for me and my boat, but not for you. We would be taking a risk..." Hilmar hesitated. But there was no question for me. If he was willing to take me I was excited to go. "Well, the day seems pretty calm and, of course, I would love to come if you are sure you are OK with it." I gently replied. "I certainly don't want to be in your way." Hilmar waved me aboard and off we went.*

*The seas were calm that day and remained so. Once we left the sunny port the mist became heavier, masking any view of the shoreline. We motored out for an hour or so, myself toward the bow and Hilmar in the tiny cabin at the stern. The*

*radio may have been playing. I don't remember. I was immersed in another world.*

*When Hilmar cut the motor, I took his spot at the back and he occupied the center of the boat. Any significant shifting required communication as there was room for only one to pass alongside the large central vat waiting to store the day's catch. Lines were released from two automated reel boxes, each tied with a series of hooks baited with old fish brought out from port. The reel boxes performed the once-manual releasing and retracting of the lines and Hilmar listened for the change in sound that experience told him indicated a bite. In the meantime we exchanged comments and observations, asking each other questions and slowly unfolding our stories.*

*Hilmar had worked in the corporate world, I learned. While fishing was an ancestral given, he had become a banker and established a home and family in Reykjavík. I was beginning to see why he spoke English as well as he did. The business world had been favourable to Hilmar in the early days but Iceland's economy had hit some rough patches and things had turned on him. Times had been really tough.*

*With little understanding of Iceland's economic history and only anecdotal threads from my recent days to go on, I was hard pressed to genuinely understand the circumstances Hilmar described. Language began to fail us. I knew I didn't have the right questions to ask and I suspected he knew I didn't really get it. Nonetheless, he kept talking and I listened intently. I could see the story in his gestures and expressions. Oddly, it appeared that Hilmar was confiding in me. He was telling me something that came along with a request for confidentiality. The details of what I had been told escaped me so, without hesitation, I could assure him his secrets were safe with me.*

*With Hanna's hold as full of fish as it needed to be, we headed back through the fog. We knew the bigger boats would have caught more than their quota, if this day was like those of recent memory. The younger fishermen would give their excess to the Old Man. Hanna could never hold the size of catch that is permitted today.*

*If it were up to Hanna and the Old Man, the sea and our secrets would be safe forever.*

## II

Many Indigenous scholars of Turtle Island have laboured long and hard to articulate methodologies that reflect highly sophisticated ways of being and living that are foundational to their cultures. In her 2017 book, *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson locates the resurgent powers of ancestral ways of life in Nishnaabeg community. She describes Nishnaabewin—“all of the associated practices, knowledge, and ethics that make us Nishnaabeg and construct the Nishnaabeg world.”<sup>20</sup> In doing this, she finds parallels in Glen Coultard’s *grounded normativity*, a term that refers to “ethical frameworks generated by these place-based practices and associated knowledges.”<sup>21</sup> “Living is a creative act,” Simpson writes, “with self-determined making at its core.”<sup>22</sup> In the consumerist life, promoted by colonization, making is reserved for artists and hobbyists, she points out, with little understanding that making is the “material basis for experiencing and influencing the world.”<sup>23</sup> From grounded, direct, place-based practices of daily life that take spiritual, emotional, and physical relationships into account, ‘making’ can expand to include manifestation on every level of life; from grounded normativity food is made, health is made, education is made, and governance is made every day. These processes create “networked relationships” in an “intelligence system [that] is a series of interconnected and overlapping algorithms—stories,

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20. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) 23.

21. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 22.

22. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 23.

23. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 23.

ceremonies, and the land itself are procedures for solving the problems of life.”<sup>24</sup> What is reiterated time and again by Indigenous peoples is that their lived way of being relies on the land, not only as soil, rock, and water, but as the *place* where culture is born and made, where their humanness can live in relationship to everything non-human and unseen.

### III

The Western perception that the human is in a position of dominance is laid bare in Benjamin’s *Storyteller*. “The hierarchy of the world of created things, which has its apex in the righteous man, reaches down into the abyss of the inanimate by many gradations,” Benjamin writes. “The righteous man is the advocate for created things and at the same time he is their highest embodiment.”<sup>25</sup> And ultimately, “The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.”<sup>26</sup> While there is so much complexity and nuance to what Benjamin expresses as a storyteller himself, these phrases echo a universalizing Western perspective of the human at the center of it all. Here, the Old Story is alive and well.

At the same time, one can trace Benjamin’s references to the relational bonds between grounded, material experience and lively storytelling that were sustained in daily life. In section II, he writes about trade structures of the Middle Ages when resident

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24. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 23.

25. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 104.

26. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 109.

master craftsmen and travelling journeymen worked side-by-side in the same room. “If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling,” he writes, “the artisan class was its university.”<sup>27</sup> The workshop was a place where those skilled with materials could combine local and foreign ways of making and infuse the exchange with the trading of stories.

In section VIII Benjamin shows how keeping stories compact, free of psychological analysis, and in the proximity of handwork is beneficial. The ability to absorb, remember, and retell a story is aided by a condition of relaxation and boredom. “Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience,” he says. Stories benefit from being repeated and the rhythm of activities such as weaving and spinning allow the listener to be “self-forgetful,” listen more deeply, and let the story “be impressed upon his memory.”<sup>28</sup> The gift of storytelling is held and nurtured in these conditions.

In the last section of *The Storyteller*, Benjamin advocates that there is an accord between the soul, the hand, and the eye and that when they are brought into connection with each other they determine a practice. The hand, trained by work, plays a part in expressing what is being voiced in story. When storytelling is at home we find the artisan, he says. The storyteller, too, can be seen as the artisan, employing human life as material. To Benjamin, the most gifted storyteller is an artisan, teacher, counselor, and sage who can fully communicate his entire life with an aura that cannot be found anywhere else.

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27. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 84-85.

28. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 91.

## Living Story Depends on Dying

In the practice of *living story* one gains tangible contact with and recognition of the interconnectedness of life and death. In the simplest of terms, living depends on dying. With this in mind, it is interesting to consider how story and storytelling relate to dying and death.

In section X of *The Storyteller* Benjamin draws connections between death, the communicability of experience and the art of storytelling in the European context. He observes that over a number of centuries the presence of the thought of death has increasingly declined due to the endorsement of hygienic and social institutions that have “made it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying.” “Dying,” he says, “was once a public process in the life of the individual [...] that has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living.”<sup>29</sup> Where one once lived in rooms in which relations had died, the dying are now moved out of daily life and into institutions. By doing so, the most powerful time for stories to be transmitted has been interrupted.

Benjamin writes:

It is [...] characteristic that not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority that even the poorest wretch in dying

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29. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 93.

possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story.<sup>30</sup>

Benjamin points out that when one is in proximity to death, either one's own or another's, life and its forces can be seen and heard with more force and veracity, thus strengthening the communicability of human experience. When death and life become separated, stories and one's capacity to see them, hear them, and ultimately transmit them weakens. The intimacy of living in and with story is lost.

While many roads in Iceland circle the edges of the fjords and return to the main highway, the road leading to Árneshreppur ends. This is where Elín Agla has chosen to live. It is a remote community which no-one simply 'passes through'. It can also be said that the community here is at the end of the road metaphorically as, according to contemporary statistical analysis, the ways of life are on the decline. Not unlike sitting day-after-day by the bedside of a parent who is dying at home, living in a community where the number of residents is decreasing and the traditional ways of life are ending brings death into sight every day. Physically, we determine the death of a person by an end to breathing or the disappearance of a pulse, but how does one determine the end of a way of life, a community, or a place? One can posit that a 'transformation' takes place, that the types of activity that once characterized the ways of life are shifting—where we once fished and shepherded, we now hike or generate electricity. We can take the view that life never really ends, that the story is never really over. But what does that do to the

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30. Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 94.

life force that comes with the communicability of experience in an ending, in a death? What happens to the story and storytelling when the ending slips silently away, behind closed doors, unnoticed and unseen?

While the specific conditions in Árneshreppur are unique to the local, vernacular culture and history that live there, something about Elín Agla's willingness be *in* and *with* the story of her place perks up the ears of many of us living in our own contexts elsewhere. What is happening in our contemporary culture that draws us to Elín's story and elevates the importance of its unfolding?

In his 2018 book *Come of Age: The Case for Elderhood in a Time of Trouble*, Stephen Jenkinson writes about the *rate of change*. Jenkinson was the director of the Palliative Care Program at Toronto's Mt. Sinai Hospital for several years and worked alongside doctors to care for hundreds of dying people and their families. Here, he became aware of a technique used in the medical field to predict the length of time left in the life of patients. The *rate of change* was the key to the determination; if symptoms in the patient were changing weekly they had weeks to live, if changing daily then days, and so on.

We are in an era of ever-accelerating change with little sense that the system is willing to voluntarily slow itself down. Jenkinson wonders what applying the *rate of change* calculation to *culture* might mean. This "rage for innovation" he observes, "discredits any experience wedded to time or place or circumstance. Take another step or two on that escalator, and you begin discrediting memory and its handmaiden, habit, as being impediments to adaptation to change. You can already tell what some of the

implications are for how we think of aging and of the aged, when we think of them at all.”<sup>31</sup> In a culture that is obsessed with ‘future proofing’ we seem to be bent on testing the limits of exponential growth with the perception that aging is behind us instead of in front of us.

Curiously, this trend doesn’t only affect the aged. While accelerated change has come with an increase in disease that obliterates memory in the elderly, Jenkinson points out that it has also come with an increase in Attention Deficit Disorder in the young. Whether the condition reflects an inability to focus or a lack of desire to pay attention it makes sense when one considers what the world asks of younger people. “The cost” Jenkinson points out, “is trying to pay attention to what’s going, going, gone, pretending its good for you to attend to the ghosted emotional and social landscape of an era in thrall of change.”<sup>32</sup> Both the ability to be alert enough to track the movements, and retaining the capacity to remember where we have been, are put to the test. The “bookends” of life bear the brunt of how it is and, as Jenkinson puts it, are “the canaries in the Anthropocene coal mine.”<sup>33</sup>

Unlimited growth is unsustainable, as the natural order of things demonstrates every day. Dieback, at some point, is inevitable. The signs show that major paradigm shifts are coming and the anxiety is palpable. Having received repeated doomsday messages in their youth and watched countless episodes of *The Walking Dead*, our

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31. Stephen Jenkinson, *Come of Age: The Case for Elderhood in Times of Trouble* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2018), 38.

32. Jenkinson, *Come of Age*, 39.

33. Jenkinson, *Come of Age*, 39.

offspring seems to be preparing for an apocalypse. When this produces a skilled blacksmith, it doesn't seem entirely concerning; it's quite uplifting, really. We're all going to need knives and hinges! When a baby's depended-upon lullaby becomes the theme song to *The Office*, however, we truly wonder where exactly we are headed. (Please laugh. Honestly, we did.) Kidding aside, what are the skillsets required to carry life through the darker days? Supporting the practices of those willing to wait, and watch, and listen, so they may witness the *unforgettable emerging* and *authoritative imparting* and retain some remembrance of how it sounded, how it looked, how one can be in it and with it, simply seems like a good idea. I count Elín Agla among these people.

### **A Space Between Stories**

In the forward to *Come of Age*, author and philosopher Charles Eisenstein frames the condition we are in with story in mind. “We are entering a space between stories. [...] The question “What story shall we create next?” is new wine in an old wine skin, contaminated with the dying story of man in the driver's seat, master of his own destiny, onward and upward along a triumphal arc of progress. Better questions might be “What story comes next?” “Which new-and-ancient story offers itself with the most beauty?” and “How might we prepare to accept it?”<sup>34</sup> The space Eisenstein proposes we are

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34. Charles Eisenstein, Forward to Stephen Jenkinson, *Come of Age: The Case for Elderhood in Times of Trouble* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2018), xvi-xvii

entering is an empty space, a place of “momentary stop,” where we can take pause to recognize “our ignorance” and “helplessness.”<sup>35</sup> From here, he believes, something truly revolutionary can come.

In Section IV of his essay, Benjamin writes about forms of counsel that are contained in stories. As the communicability of experience has decreased, opportunities to “have counsel” have also declined. Benjamin clarifies that “counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding.”<sup>36</sup> The trick, he points out, is that in order to seek counsel from the storyteller one must be able communicate the story they are in; the capacity to receive counsel is in direct relation to the capacity to allow one’s situation to speak. With a heightened skill to hear and tell stories, wisdom is “woven into the fabric of real life.”<sup>37</sup> The grief of the loss of storytelling sits heavily here.

Curiously, Benjamin goes on to dispel the binary trap of assuming that the decline of storytelling is entirely troublesome. Yes, the art of storytelling is coming to an end and with it epic truth and wisdom are dying out, he says. But this has been coming for a long time and it is foolish to see it as a symptom of ‘decay’ or of ‘modern’ circumstances. The decline of storytelling accompanies the “secular productive forces of history,” he states, and these have gradually removed narrative from living speech. While the meaning of

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35. Charles Eisenstein, “Why Aren’t Systems Changing?” May 30, 2018, published by the Edmond Hillary Fellowship, online video. Accessed Feb 13, 2019.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UneF2\\_P0h18](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UneF2_P0h18)

36. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 86.

37. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 86-87.

this part of his statement requires significant unpacking and debate, a thesis in its own right, in the context of this text it is what Benjamin says next that is the focus. The decline of the art of storytelling, he concludes, “is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.”<sup>38</sup> While throughout the text Benjamin proliferates with descriptions of the deep richness of the storytelling tradition and deeply laments what has been lost with its decline, here he posits an alternative reading to the shift. Is this *new beauty* what may appear in the ‘space between stories’ that Eisenstein refers to? Is this the ‘new-and-ancient story,’ perhaps a narrative that is not in the realm of human speech? Here, the germinative power of Benjamin’s own storytelling lays bare the conundrum in the communicability of human experience. He doesn’t explain what he is seeing exactly, he can’t fill in the picture, but he touches the edge of a hole that leaves us wondering and imagining what might appear out of the void

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38. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 87.

## **On Whaleroads and Boatmaking**

How do we make space for what is between us and between stories? This brings us back to Elín Agla, myself, and the space and stories we tend to. While the academic context supports a composting process for intellectual content, the lived relations that we foster *make* the humus on which we stand and from which our food grows. As Cree scholar Shawn Wilson so poignantly and pointedly states in his book *Research is Ceremony*, “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you haven’t done it right.”<sup>39</sup> *How* we are as people needs to reflect our learning, scholarship, and discipline. My relationship with Elín Agla has been my ceremonial ground.

Elín and I have co-authored a small publication titled *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*. The seed for its making was planted one day when, in conversation over Skype, we happened upon a comparative analysis of the Icelandic and English words for ‘that which binds pages together.’ We discovered that in Icelandic the word is *kjölnur*, meaning keel—akin to the keel of a boat—while in English we employ the word ‘spine.’ Frankly, that one thought, that one realization, was all we needed to want to make a book together. Would that this book honour the spirit and beauty that appeared in that moment.

*On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* contains some of what we have heard, seen, or spoken to over the months we have been attending to this ‘project’ and the larger arc of our ongoing lived work. It is not intended to provide information or explain anything. It

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39. Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 135.

is meant to construct a hull, the belly of a floating form, that can hold our stories, our longings, and our grief in honour of something both bigger and smaller than ourselves—something that can ferry between our harbours making safe passage on the whaleroad, something that can be formed by the wake of the whispers and nudges that seem to come from behind us and lap up within arm's reach.

The events we are holding in Toronto, in the place where I and my family make home, intend to introduce and host *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*. (Appendix A contains documentation of the project and related events.) These events are not performances, nor are they information sessions or exhibitions. These events aim to make a space between stories, to make a space for stories of stories, to wonder what stories have meant to us, and to be in and with a story that we may not recognize yet. We gather to wonder what Story is becoming.

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Appendix A:

### **Documentation of the Project and Related Events**

This thesis was written in conjunction with the co-authored publication *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* by Elin Agla and Panya Clark Espinal.

The following co-hosted gatherings were held:

Open Houses April 17 and 20, 2019. 2-7pm

Invitational Feast April 18, 2019. 7pm

Location: 406 Armadale Ave., Toronto. M6S 3X8 (Panya Clark Espinal's home)

The following is a capture of a PowerPoint Presentation designed to introduce the project to the public at the OCADU Grad Ex 104, May 1-5, 2019.

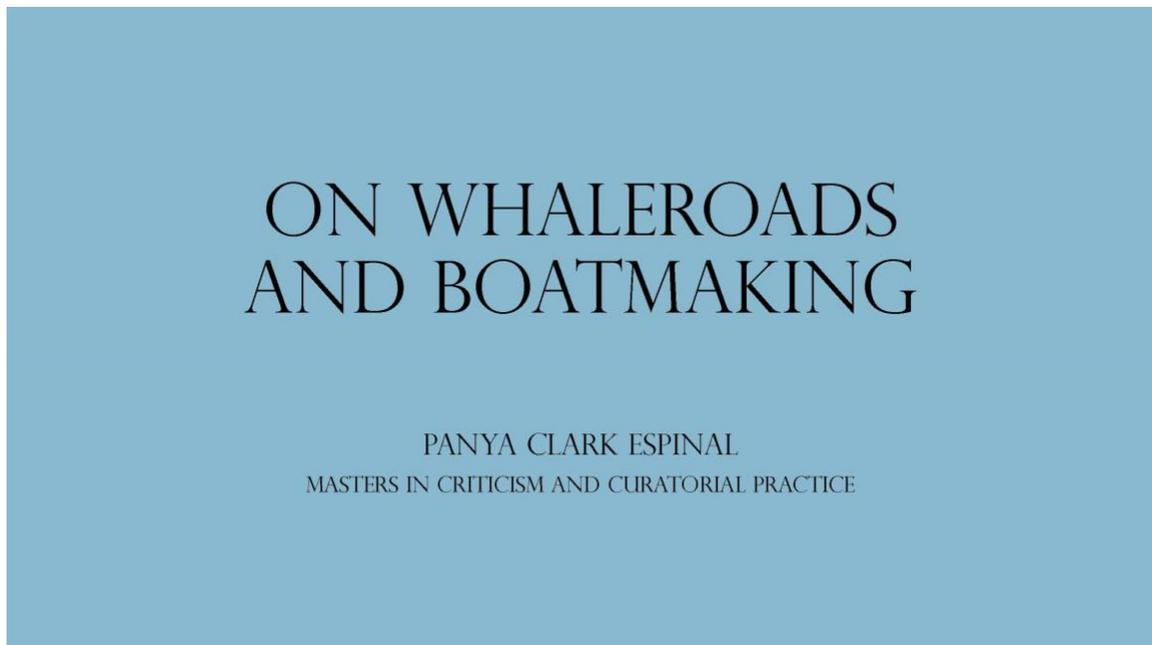


Figure 1. PowerPoint Slide 1 - Title page – Text: On Whaleroads and Boatmaking. Panya Clark Espinal. Masters in Criticism and Curatorial Practice

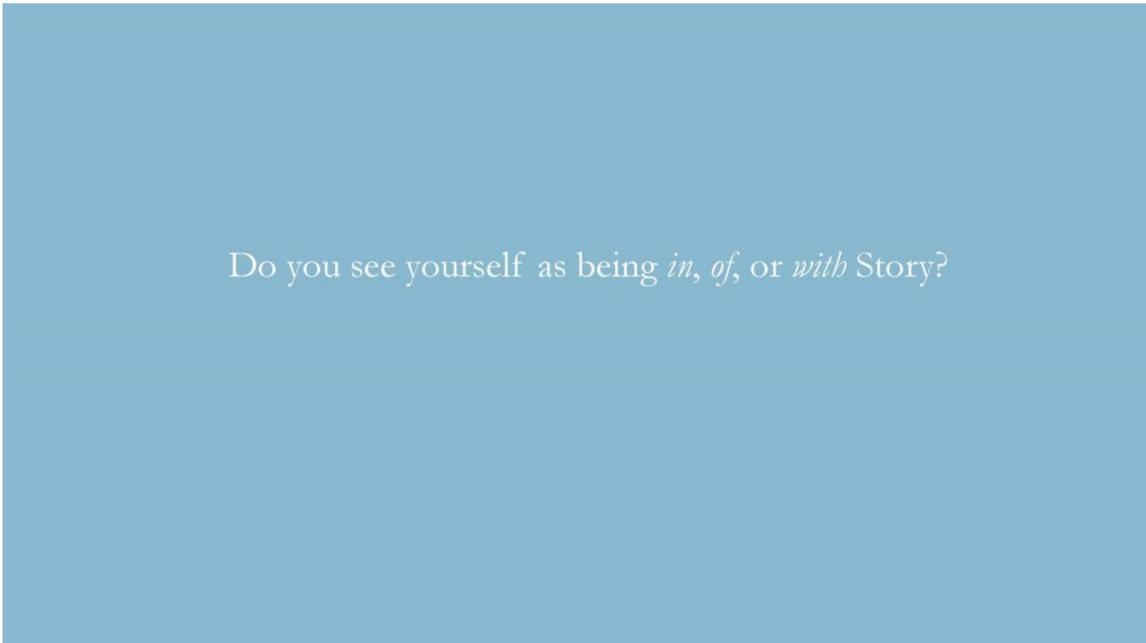


Figure 2. PowerPoint Slide 2 - Text: Do you see yourself as being *in, of, or with* Story?

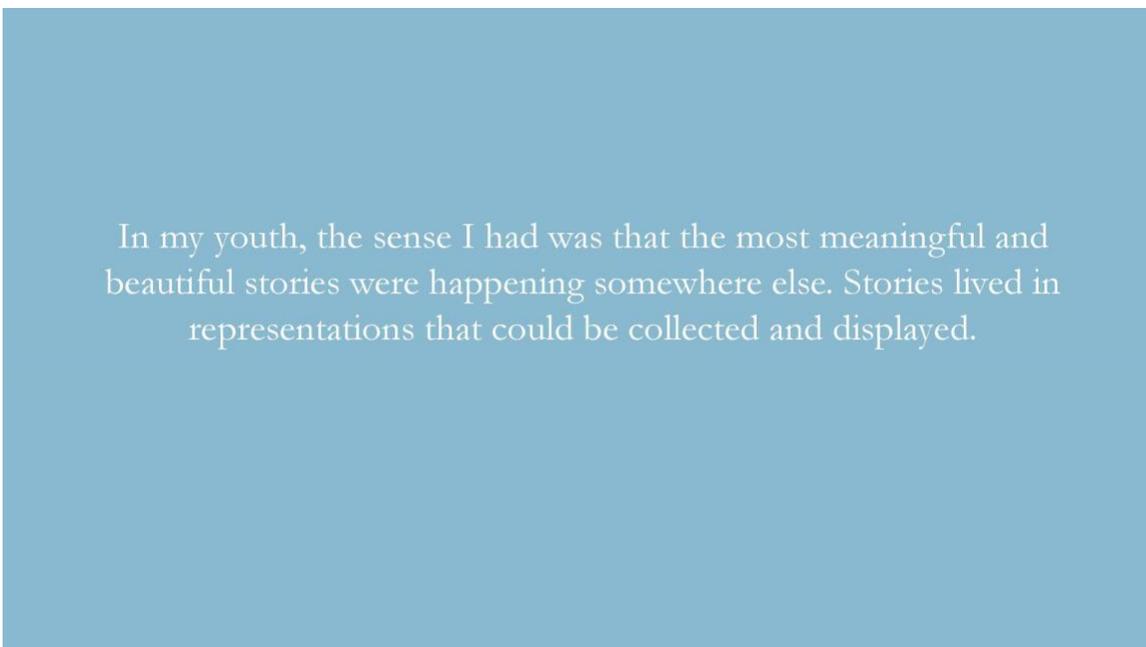


Figure 3. PowerPoint Slide 3 – Text: In my youth, the sense I had was that the most meaningful and beautiful stories were happening elsewhere. Stories lived in representations that could be collected and displayed.

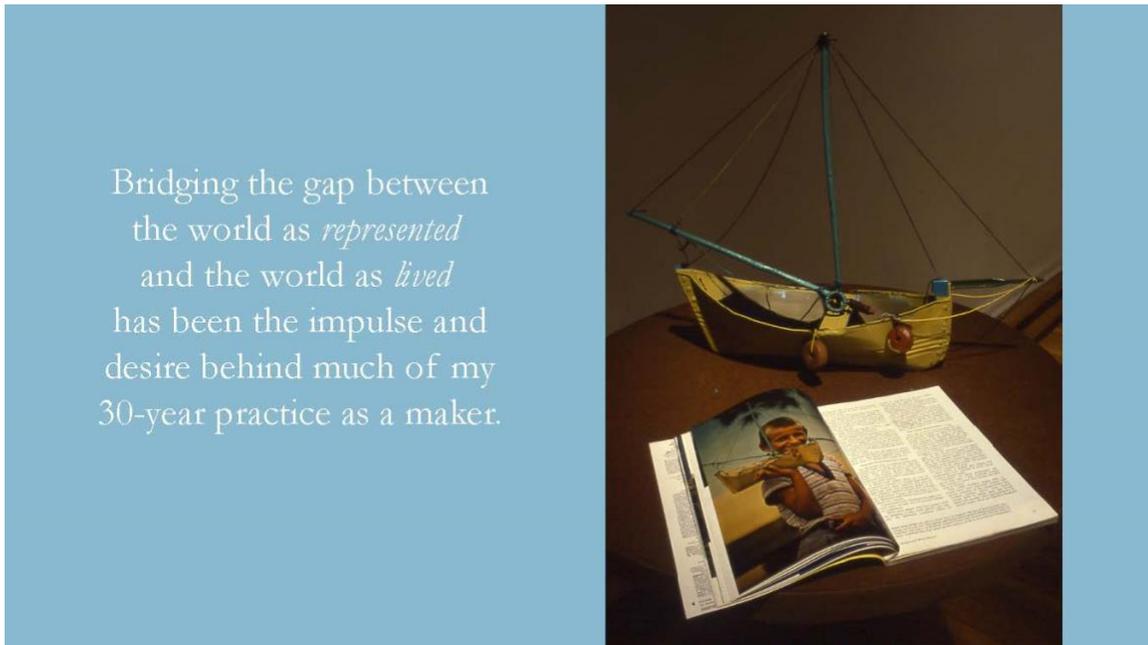


Figure 4. PowerPoint Slide 4 – Text: Bridging the gap between the world as *represented* and the world as *lived* has been the purpose of my life as a maker. Image: Detail of *Research and Discovery*, 1988 by Panya Clark Espinal

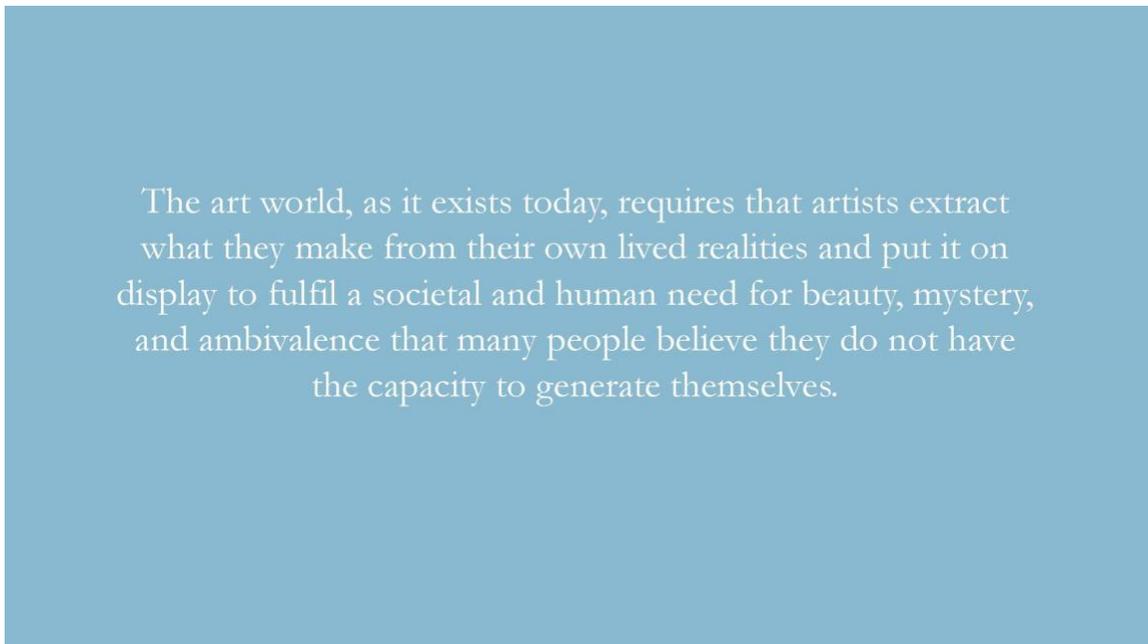


Figure 5. PowerPoint Slide 5 - The art world, as it exists today, requires that artists extract what they make from their own lived realities and put it on display to fulfil a societal and human need for beauty, mystery, and ambivalence that many of us believe we do not have the capacity to generate ourselves.



Figure 6. PowerPoint Slide 6 - Our systems of exhibition and display can operate as containment devices that, while cherishing, protecting, and preserving human-made endeavours, also entrap them within a colonizing system that takes away their wildness—their capacity to live and die in communion with a natural order. Image: Storage room at the Art Gallery of Ontario containing Inuit sculptures on industrial metal shelving.

My thesis project, *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*, attempts to practice a way of living and being that defends wildness and makes space for Story as an animate entity we can pay attention to.

Figure 7. PowerPoint Slide 7 – Text: My thesis project, *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*, attempts to practice a way of living and being that defends wildness and makes space for Story as an animate entity we can pay attention to.



Figure 8. PowerPoint Slide 8 – Text: *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* was developed in collaboration with Elín Agla, a Vernacular Culture Farmer from Árneshreppur County, Iceland. Image: Elín Agla standing outdoors at Stóra-Ávik, a farm near Árnes, Iceland.



Figure 9. PowerPoint Slide 9 – Text: Vernacular Culture Farming requires living with Story in mind when cultivating practices that are unique to local conditions. Image: Hilmar Thorarensen cod fishing on his boat, Hanna of Gjörgur

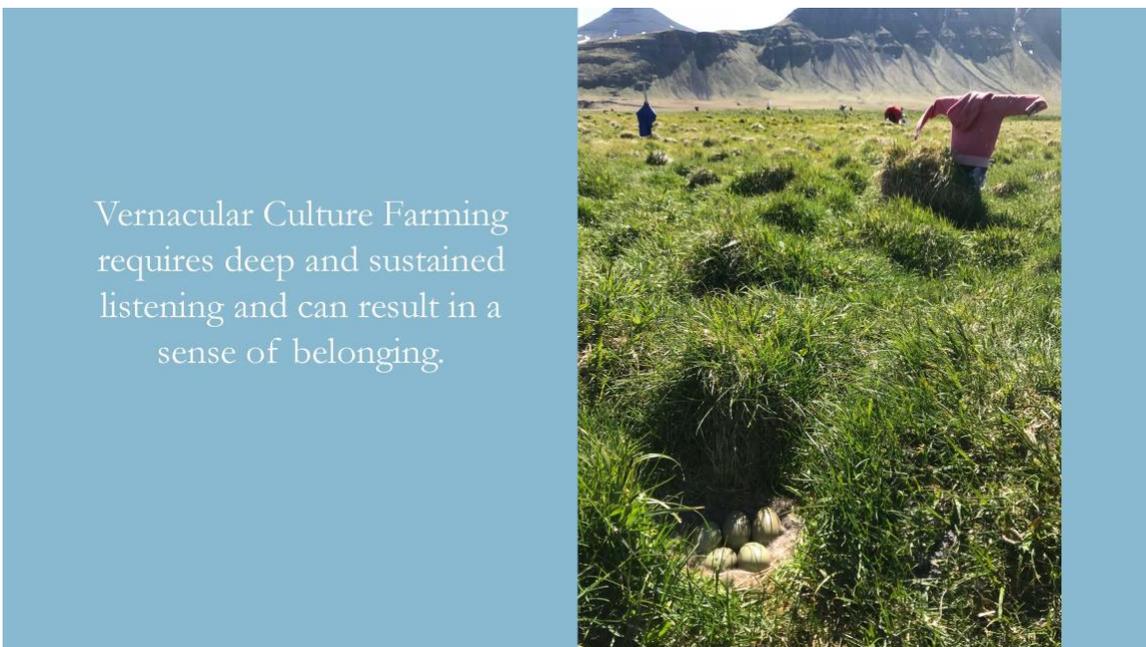


Figure 10. PowerPoint Slide 10 – Text: Vernacular Culture Farming requires deep and sustained listening and can result in a sense of belonging. Image: Eiderdown harvesting in Árnes, Iceland.



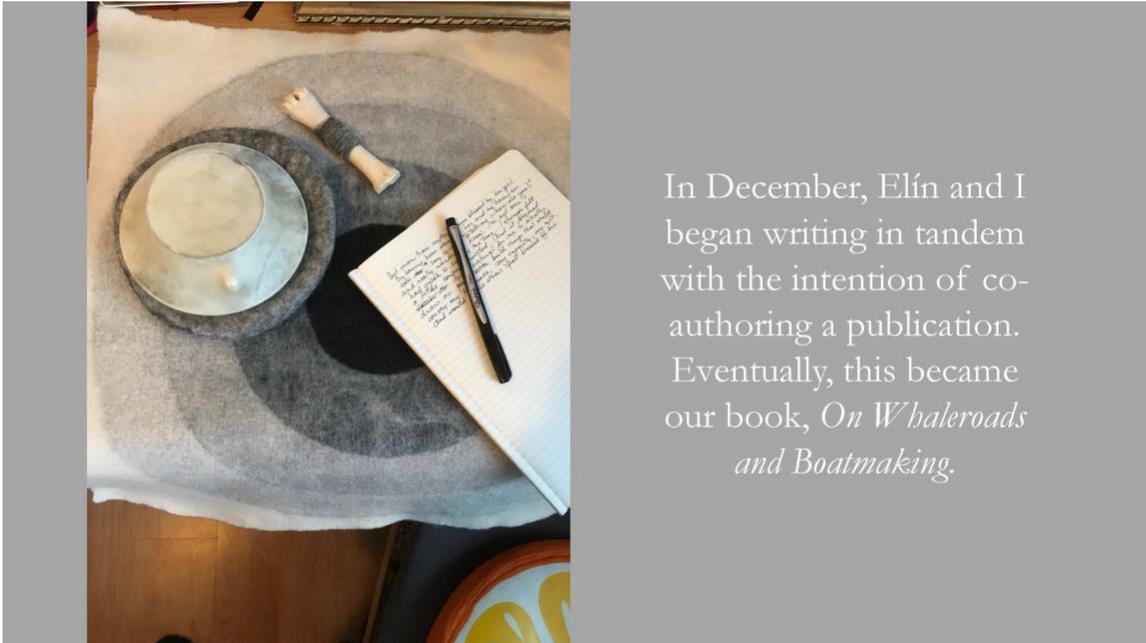
Figure 11. PowerPoint Slide 11 – Text: I visited Elín's region in Iceland several times—including the most light-filled and the darkest times of the year. Image: The full moon rising as we head into the darkest night, taken on the road to Ingólfssjörður, Iceland.



Figure 12. PowerPoint Slide 12 – Text: As an Artist Curator, *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* required me to be tutored by the story as it was unfolding. I had to pay attention to what was needed to support Elín Agla's practice and, in turn, develop my capacity to bring the elements together that would cultivate connectedness. Images: (left) Needlebinding in Elín's kitchen in Norðurfjörður with Maddy, Panya on right. (Right) Elín Agla, Stephen O'Brien and Ana Elia Ramon Hidalgo in Ingólfssjörður.



Figure 13. PowerPoint Slide 13 – Text: I wanted to invite many people into the story, along with non-human, seen and unseen entities. Images: (left) Carm Espinal doing an illustration for *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*, while at home in Toronto. (middle) Jóhanna Engilrãð Hrafnisdóttir with Sofie in Norðurfjöður. (right) Mary Clark at the potter's wheel in Toronto, turning the first Thesis Cup.



In December, Elín and I began writing in tandem with the intention of co-authoring a publication. Eventually, this became our book, *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*.

Figure 14. PowerPoint Slide 14 – Text: In December, we began writing in tandem with the intention of co-authoring a publication. Eventually this became our book, *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*. Image: My writings desk in Dangsnes, Iceland, with a felted panel I made and brought from Toronto, that I later gifted to Marta Guðrun Jóhannesdóttir, a hide covered tea cup that I also make in Toronto, and my note book and pen.



Figure 15. PowerPoint Slide 15 – Text: The book travels back and forth between our ports, ferrying our kinship. Image: Elín Agla at our dining room table in Toronto during the first Open House, signing one of the books.

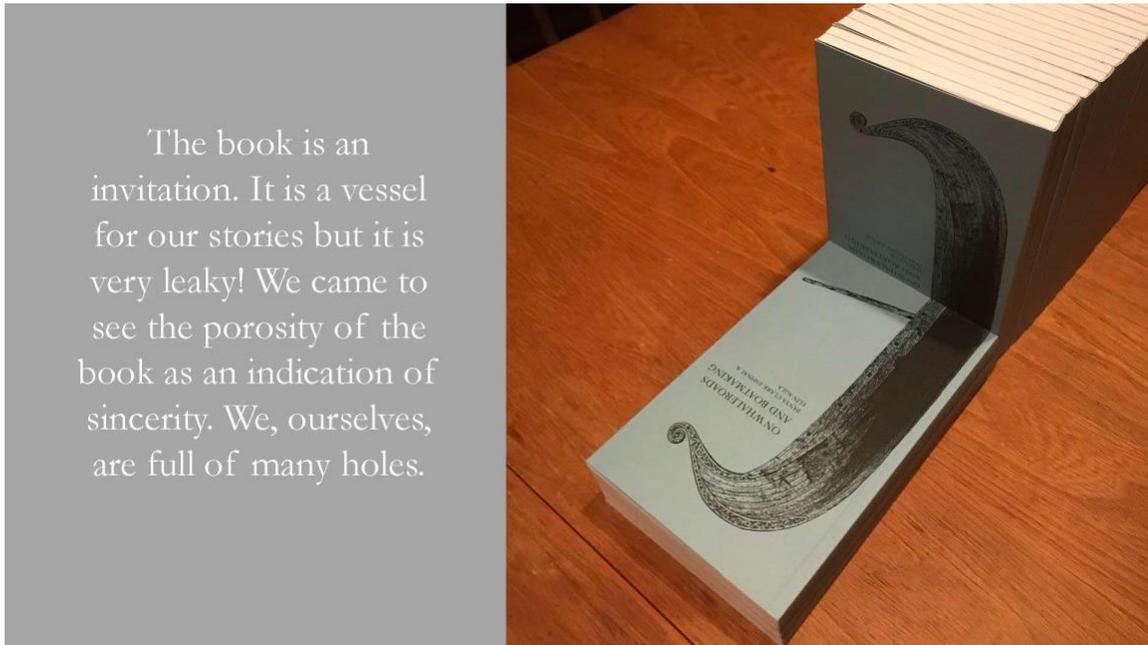


Figure 16. PowerPoint Slide 16 – Text: The book is an invitation. It is a vessel for our stories but it is very leaky! We came to see the porosity of the book as an indication of sincerity. We, ourselves, are full of many holes. Image: The books on my dining room table. The cover image shows half a boat and the books can be stacked in such a way that together they can form a whole boat.

In the final days of my curatorial project, I welcomed Elín Agla to Toronto where we co-hosted two Open House events and a by-invitation Thesis Feast in my home. The 37 invited guests included family, friends, neighbours, professors, colleagues, and children.



Figure 17. PowerPoint Slide 17 – Text: In the final days of my curatorial project, I welcomed Elín Agla to Toronto where we co-hosted two Open House events and a by-invitation Thesis Feast in my home. The 37 invited guests included family, friends, neighbours, professors, colleagues, and children. Image: Elín Agla and I standing beside an illuminated sign the reads “The Feast,” in my front porch at 406 Armadale Ave. The sign was brought to the house on the day of the feast and installed by Carm Espinal. Photo: by Andrea Conte

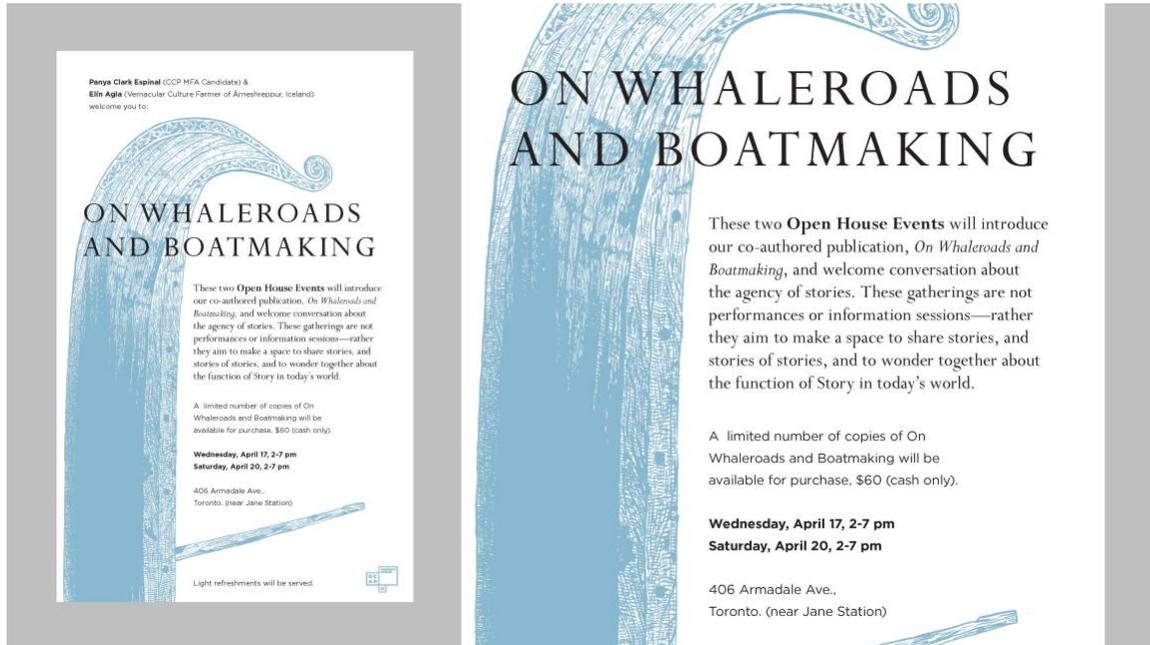


Figure 18. PowerPoint Slide 18 – Text: Panya Clark Espinal (CCP MFA Candidate) and Elín Agla (Vernacular Culture Farmer of Árneshreppur, Iceland) welcome you to ON WHALEROADS AND BOATMAKING. These two Open House Events will introduce our co-authored publication, *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*, and welcome conversation about the agency of stories. These gatherings are not performances or information sessions—rather they aim to make a space to share stories, and stories of stories, and to wonder together about the function of Story in today's world. A limited number of copies of *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* will be available for purchase. \$60 (cash only). Wednesday, April 17, 2-7pm. Saturday, April 20, 2-7 pm. 406 Armadale Ave., Toronto. (near Jane Station) Image: The poster that was put up around the OCADU campus to announce the Open Houses. It was designed by Tal Sofia and featured the boat illustration by Carm Espinal.

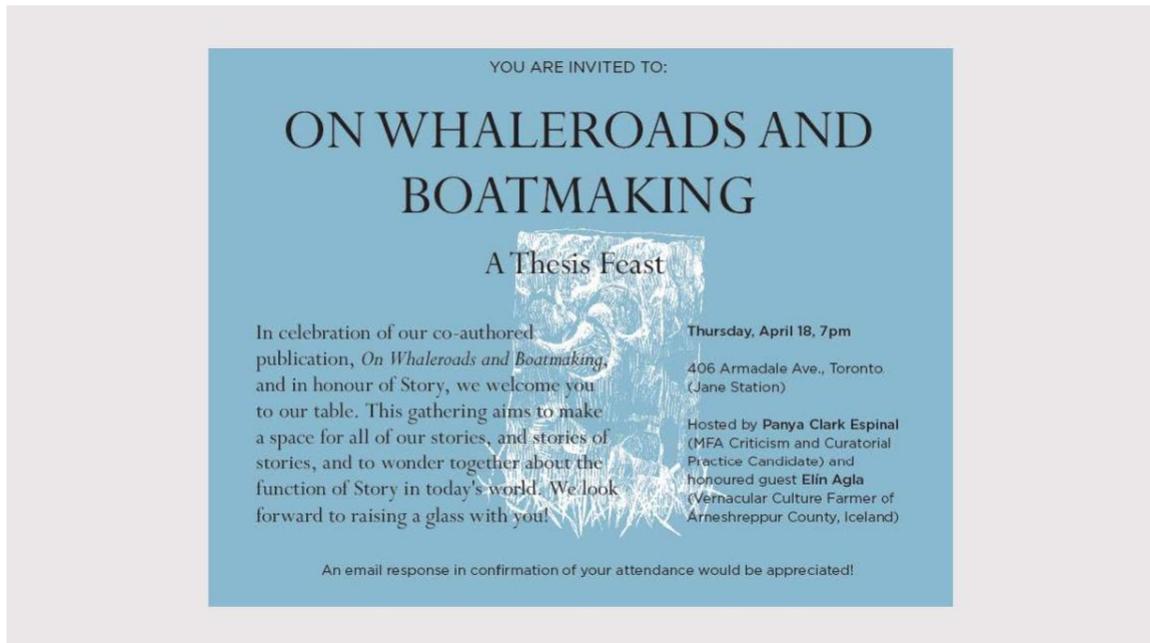


Figure 19. PowerPoint Slide 19 – Text: You are invited to ON WHALEROADS AND BOATMAKING A Thesis Feast. In celebration of our co-authored publication *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking*, and in honour of Story, we welcome you to our table. This gathering aims to make a space for all of our stories, and stories of stories, and to wonder together about the function of Story in today's world. We look forward to raising a glass with you! Thursday, April 18, 7pm. 406 Armadale Ave., (Jane Station) Hosted by Panya Clark Espinal (MFA CCP Candidate) and honoured guest, Elín Agla (Vernacular Culture Farmer of Árneshreppur County, Iceland) An email response in confirmation of your attendance would be appreciated. Image: The Thesis Feast invitation which was a GIF (the image floating in the background behind the text rotated among many of the images Carm Espinal drew for the book) and was emailed to those invited.



Figure 20 PowerPoint Slide 20 – Text: Many special foods were prepared including cod from Elin's port, Hopi blue corn tamales, and Gateau Basque. Images: (left) Ana Elia Ramon Hidalgo and Elin Agla grinding the nixtamalized corn for the masa in the kitchen at 406 Armadale. (middle) Elin Agla preparing the cod. (right) Ana Elia Ramon Hidalgo and Andrea Conte singing and playing the piano before the guests arrive. Four tables have been assembled together to form a long line down the centre of the dining and living rooms of the house and set in anticipation of the feast.

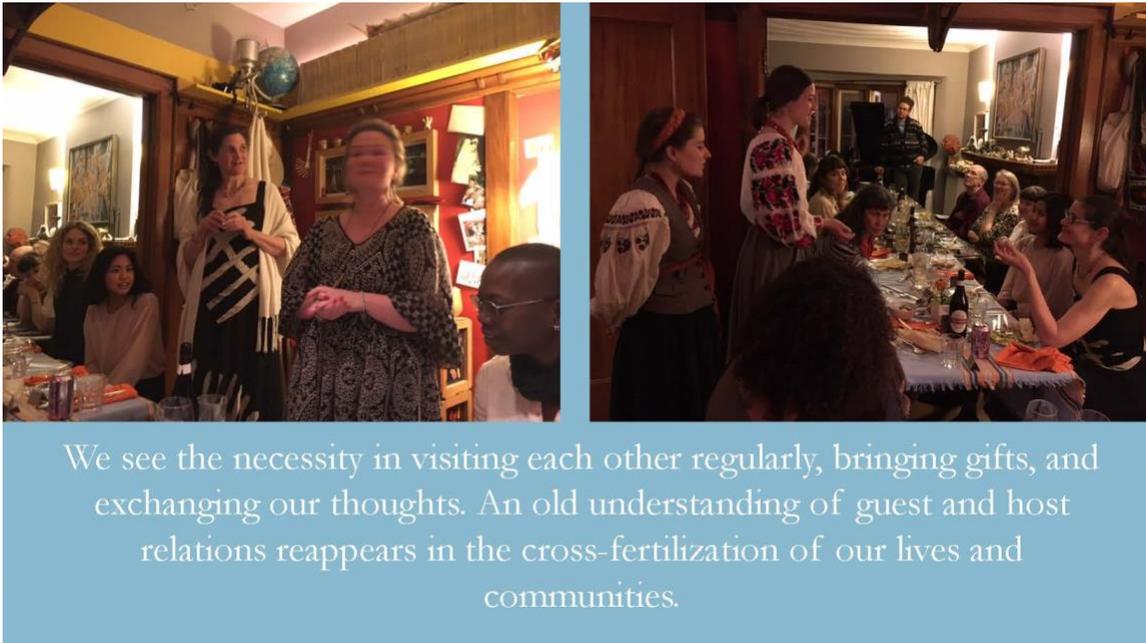


Figure 21. PowerPoint Slide 21 – Text: We see the necessity in visiting each other regularly, bringing gifts, and exchanging our thoughts. An old understanding of guest and host relations reappears in the cross-fertilization of our lives and communities. Images: (left) Elín Agla introduces the cod. People are gathered at the feast table. Left to right are Tal Sofia, Elizabeth Handley-Derry, Erica Cristobal, Panya Clark Espinal, Elín Agla, Andrea Fatona. (right) Olenka gifts a hand painted Ukrainian Easter egg to Panya. Left to right are Bozena Hrycyna, Olenka Kleban, Keiko Hart, Jennifer Mazurkiewicz, Andrea Conte, Clive Clark, Caroline Langill, Tal Sofia, Erica Cristobal, Panya Clark Espinal. Photos by Georgiana Ulyarik



Figure 22. PowerPoint Slide 22 – Text: The events were intended to introduce the book and to make a place for story, and stories of story, and to build a framework for wondering what Story is becoming. Images: (top left) Hester Koopman, Monica Mazurkiewicz, and Carm Espinal sitting in the driveway and talking. (Top right) Ana Elia Ramon Hidalgo, Peter (next door neighbor), and Elín Agla at the dining room table during the second Open House. (Bottom right) Valéry Frappier and Irene at the second Open House. (Bottom left) Javier Espinal and Ana Elia Ramon Hidalgo in the dining room before the feast.

My academic paper, *Between Stories: The Agency of Story and Living Ways*, was developed concurrently with the work I was doing with Elín.

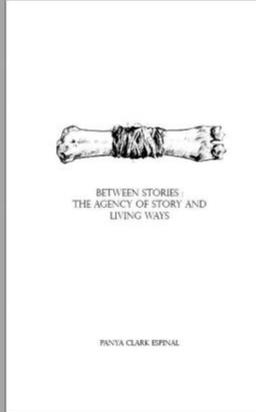
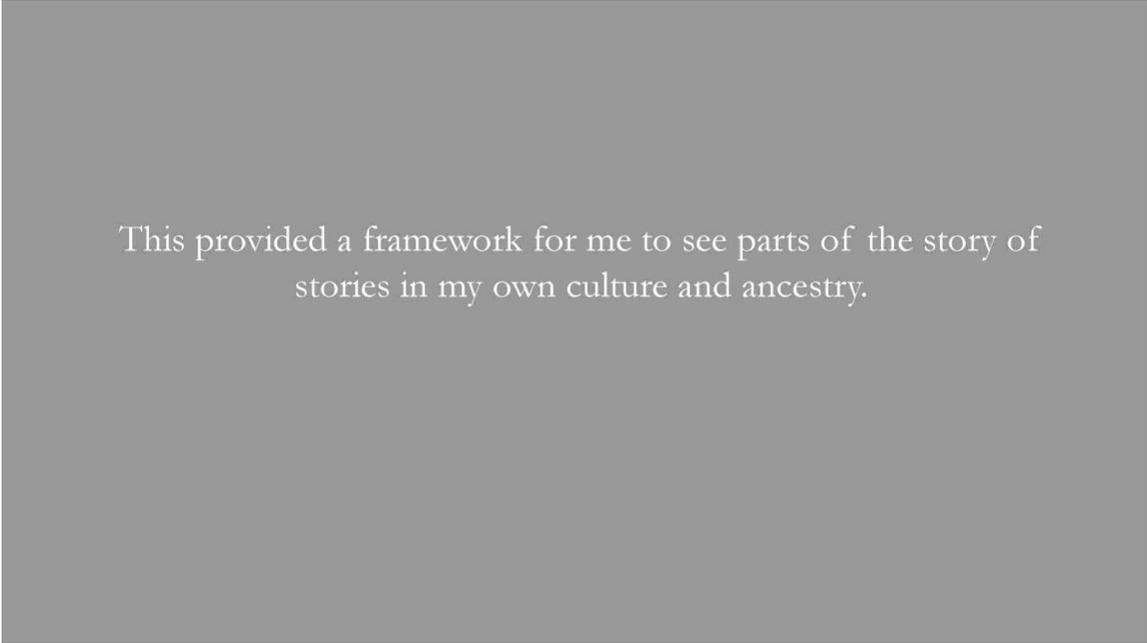


Figure 23. PowerPoint Slide 23 – Text: My academic paper, *Between Stories: The Agency of Story and Living Ways*, was developed concurrently with the work I was doing alongside Elín. Image: The cover of the thesis paper as I designed it to give to people.

The development of this paper gave me the opportunity to explore three conditions of cultural connection to story:

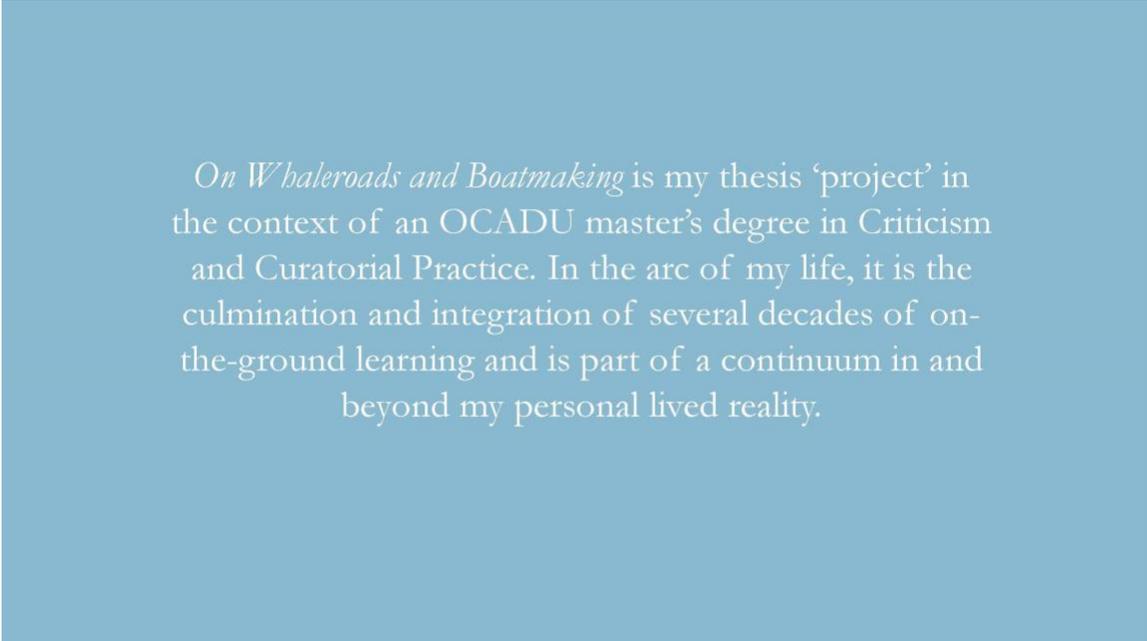
- *The Storyteller* as seen by Walter Benjamin in 1930's Germany/France,
- the role of story in Turtle Island Indigenous culture as described by Leanne Simpson and Thomas King,
- and the effect of the Norse Sagas on Icelandic identity as described by Bergsveinn Birgisson.

Figure 24. PowerPoint Slide 24 – Text: The development of this paper gave me the opportunity to explore three conditions of cultural connection to story—The Storyteller as seen by Walter Benjamin in 1930's Germany/France, the role of story in Turtle Island Indigenous culture as described by Leanne Simpson and Thomas King, and the effect of the Norse Sagas on Icelandic identity as described by Bergsveinn Birgisson.



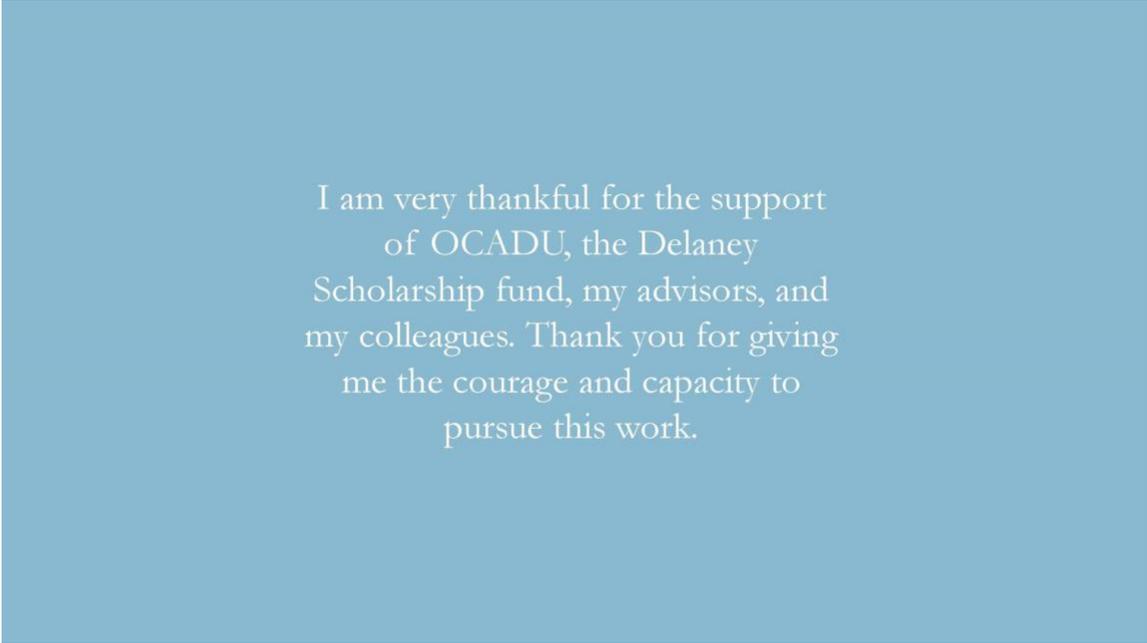
This provided a framework for me to see parts of the story of stories in my own culture and ancestry.

Figure 25. PowerPoint Slide 25 – Text: This provided a framework for me to see the story of stories in my own culture.



*On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* is my thesis 'project' in the context of an OCADU master's degree in Criticism and Curatorial Practice. In the arc of my life, it is the culmination and integration of several decades of on-the-ground learning and is part of a continuum in and beyond my personal lived reality.

Figure 26. PowerPoint Slide 26 – Text: *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* is my thesis 'project' in the context of an OCADU master's degree in Criticism and Curatorial Practice. However, for me personally, it is the culmination and integration of several decades of on-the-ground learning and is part of a continuum in and beyond my lived reality.



I am very thankful for the support of OCADU, the Delaney Scholarship fund, my advisors, and my colleagues. Thank you for giving me the courage and capacity to pursue this work.

Figure 27. PowerPoint Slide 27 – Text: I am very thankful for the support OCADU, my advisors, and my colleagues have given me to pursue this work.

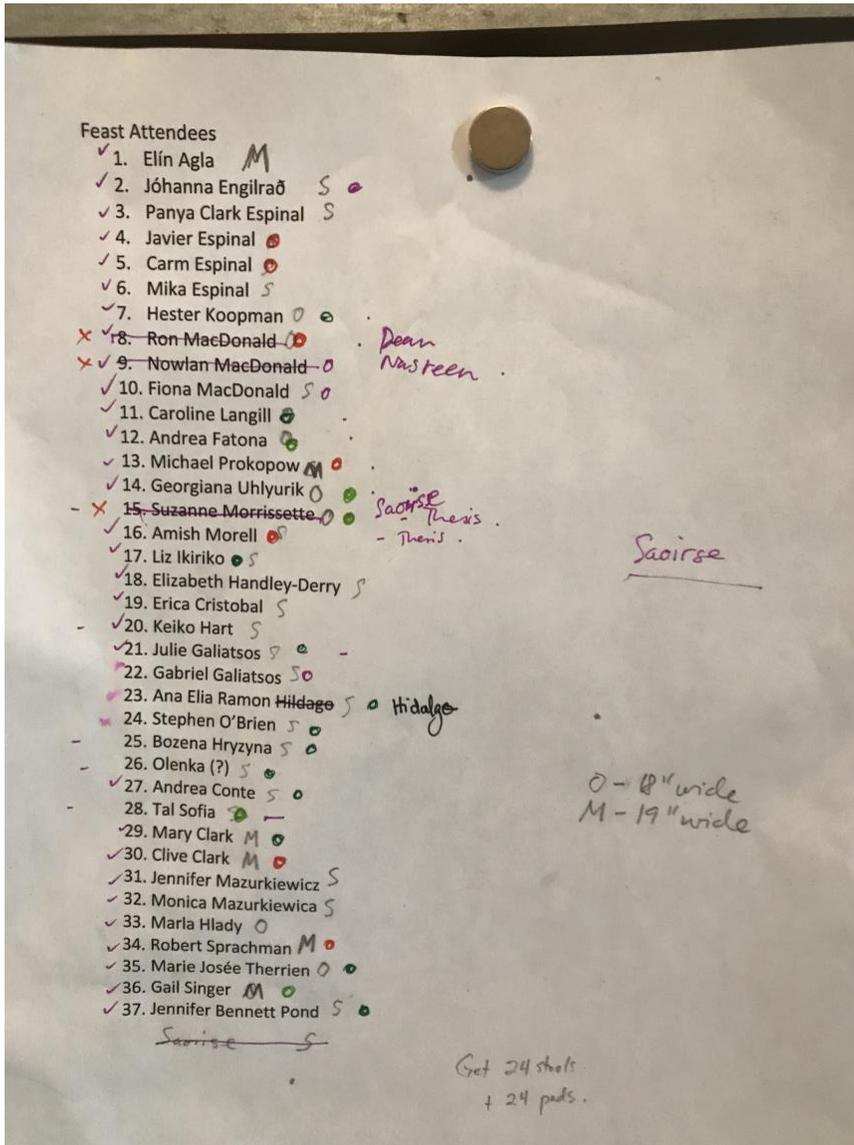


Figure 28. Image: The list of those invited to and attending the feast.

## Appendix B:

**Written Remembrances of the Thesis Feast by Gail Singer and Amish Morrell**

By Gail Singer:

I like to think back to the very earliest “feasts.” In my mind they are about the recognition - the discovery - that fire and foodstuffs are a spectacular marriage. It probably wasn’t until our distant ancestors chanced upon a roasted rabbit or deer after a fire blazed through a forest, that people began to gather together to eat at fire’s side, (and not stop, solo, on the path during a standard hunting and gathering day). It may be the earliest discovery by our ancestors that we had something to say to each other, maybe just in the form of grunts - or even smiles - about the food, and indeed about our lives.

Today, life without the pleasure of sitting with friends and family and sharing food drink and stories, is almost unimaginable.

Panya knows this very well. Panya being Panya knows it in her mind and heart, her belly, in the feet and legs that hold her up through long cooking commitments, and in her mouth: she’s a taster. She knows food, and cherishes it. I have seen the same trait in her husband, her parents, her children and I remember it in her late grandmother, even if she (her grandmother) was fed up with Loblaw’s and Dominion, the supermarkets which replaced the open street fruit, vegetable, meat and cheese markets that were part of her Russian, and French past.

The night of the magnificent feast Panya organized and executed (with the tiniest bit of help from me) (I smeared 75 blinis with cream cheese and toppings of variations on a theme of red, green and black Icelandic faux caviar - transported by Panya’s sidekick/collaborator from Iceland.). In the meantime a crew of about half a dozen friends cooked and created numerous dishes, crowned by perfectly pan fried cod, hauled to Canada by the aforementioned Icelandic compatriot.

But the piece de resistance was the bonhomie, the affection, the familiarity, of each end every individual at the table from the parents, Clive and Mary, to the offspring, Mika and Carm, to the extended family and friends, which included artists and storytellers and architects and firefighters and fashionistas...and then there were the voices and notes of unique melodies in several languages, from innumerable cultures, performed by musicians and wordsmiths. So, besides traditional Icelandic desserts (some known only in Gimli, Manitoba), Basque desserts, in honour of Javier, Panya’s husband, there was more than I can possibly remember, let alone have room for after the abundance of the savoury dishes.

This Feast, Panya’s feast, intersected with Passover, and it brought to mind an aspect of the Seder, the ritual meal, that most appeals to me. I find the rhetoric of the Seder sometimes dissonant, not at all synchronistic with modern thinking, especially for an atheist. What I do love and appreciate is that Jewish families and friends of every stripe gather together at this time of year, speak the same language, can choose to discuss or not, argue or not, the relevance of the words of the Seder. And all have

been participating in this ritual for thousands of years. It is reassuring.

What I am left with is a sense of belonging to a remarkable world of individuals who harness friendship, devotion, and intelligent pursuits; people whose own integrity, humour and talent help to make one's own endeavours worth the effort. How better to celebrate this, a grand Feast!

The hard part is repeating this every year: same day, same way. Good luck. I'll be there.

By Amish Morrell:

Hi Panya,

Sorry to take so long getting to this - I'm writing this as an email. The style might be a little wacky since it's so spontaneous and unedited, and because it conjured memories of other meals, and I ran out of time to fully flesh out this connection. It all goes to say that this is among the best feasts of a lifetime! (I mean this as an event, as a performance, as a gathering, as a meal).

It goes up there with thanksgivings from the '70s in Cape Breton, where all the "come-from-aways" - American back-to-the-landers - would get together in a nearby one-room school house, and have a big Thanksgiving meal together, with food that everyone grew themselves. Homemade pies, homemade wine, mothers nursing infants, lots of dogs, us kids gorging ourselves on cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie and playing under the table, crazy Watkins presiding over the dinner in a top hat, and then crawling around under the rows of tables, likely looking up women's skirts. As kids we'd later find him asleep under the table. Sometimes there'd also be a scavenger hunt or a hayride, the 1946 John Deere pulling a load of people up the valley in the fall colours. When I went out there last fall, to our new place, at the end of a yet another long dirt road, I had just missed thanksgiving where people told me there was a bonfire and a reincarnated being, the next Rimpoche, a twenty-year old guy in a heavy metal t-shirt, at the old summer camp above Magic Cove that had been run by students of Wilhelm Reich.

It also goes up there with wild dinners in Kensington Market at my anarchist neighbour's house, with the Serbian woman who smashed all of the plates after we ate (vegetarian of course) and drank bottles of

cheap red wine, hurling the plates into the corner of the room, until the neighbours pounded on the wall demanding we stop.

And it goes up there with meals that were also epic journeys through the bush, with trout, chanterelles, blueberries, cranberries, gathering food as we travelled to waterfalls and mountain tops, and stopping to cook it, bringing bottles of wine to chill in the river, our exposed flesh to feed the blackflies. On one walk, someone brought magic mushroom tea, and time travelled backwards as we climbed the mountain, ascending faster than the sun could retreat over the horizon. And then it sped up again as we descended into the next valley, where I'd left home-made aphrodisiac beer in the river, to give us courage to cross the rapids, and inspiration to walk the last stretch in the dark. Each walk always including every previous journey through the same place, through its stories, through the memories contained in the body and in the land itself. And maybe each great meal, each thanksgiving, each feast, is the same, they are a conversation with those we've eaten with before.

To Panya's feast, I came with a poem. That morning Diane, my partner, had given me a piece of writing by Mary Oliver (she had been memorizing poems while she swam laps in the pool at LA fitness, up the street), which I had planned to read to Peter Morin, when I met him that morning. But time got away from me and I didn't. Later was a time for sharing stories and poems, and songs.

The dinner began with Panya introducing and telling stories about everyone, not unlike Simonedes, the Greek Poet, whose role had been to tell stories about the people at a great dinner party (except the story about Simonedes is a tragic one, but becomes a metaphor for memory, and the reference for the "memory palace" (Francis Yates). (And unlike for Simonedes, Panya's roof did not collapse.) Panya introduced her classmates, her professors, all of the people who were part of her MFA work, her parents, her ancestors - she told the story of her grandmother, whose painting of the bathhouse hung above her mantle, with women scrubbing one another and nursing infants, in the St. Petersburg banya. The cups were ones she made with her mother too, who had once dredged clay from the Don Valley and made glaze for ashes in her fireplace. The ones she made for the dinner came with her stamp on them, linking these objects back across time. The meal where the host made not only the food, but some of the dishes, in a place not just full of art, but made of it - conjured many earlier meals, in old schoolhouses, in tipis, in farmhouses, in log cabins, on the riverbank.

At Panya's feast I sat next to Gail Singer, a documentary film maker who made a film about Panya's grandmother in the 1970s. Physically, Gail was almost a mirror reflection of Aida Arnold, a Mexican-Italian who trained as a chef in Paris and had married a Cape Bretoner, and became our neighbour in Cape Breton, and who had been at many of our thanksgivings. I felt an immediate familiarity towards her, and as we talked we discovered that she knew my Aunt, a Russian Jew who'd grown up in the North End of Winnipeg, long before she was my aunt. My Aunt's mother had married an artist who was South Asian, and this had been a scandal in the community there in the 1970s, and my aunt had joined a commune that established itself in Cape Breton, split from the group, and then married into my family. We knew many people in common. These connections of people and place went back far beyond this - at one point Javier brought out a Basque cake, from the Basque region of Spain. The Basques fished the waters around Cape Breton Island and Newfoundland, long before colonization, and the symbol that appeared on the cake was one that he told me, also appeared on Mi'kmaq canoes.

I thought about reading my Mary Oliver poem, but I didn't. I thought about talking about this incredible cohort of graduate students that I had the privilege of working with, but time got away, and people weren't quite inebriated enough. Later, when Elin and Panya brought out whiskey that had been smoked over sheep manure, and we sat in the backyard, and told more stories, I read the Mary Oliver piece:

"It is six A.M., and I am working. I am absentminded, reckless, heedless of social obligations, etc. It is as it must be. The tire goes flat, the tooth falls out, there will be a hundred meals without mustard. The poem gets written. I have wrestled with the angel and I am stained with light and I have no shame. Neither do I have guilt. My responsibility is not to the ordinary, or the timely. It does not include mustard, or teeth. It does not extend to the lost button, or the beans in the pot. My loyalty is to the inner vision, whenever and howsoever it may arrive. If I have a meeting with you at three o'clock, rejoice if I am late. Rejoice even more if I do not arrive at all."

These lines are worth repeating

"I have wrestled with the angle and I am stained with light and I have no shame."

"My responsibility is not to the ordinary or the timely."

One must have poetry with sheep manure moonshine. Where I am from, they use it in tea to cure childhood ailments. In Iceland the tourist farmers use it to add terroir to their whiskey, or maybe to gain advantage over their enemies.

In the days after I told everyone about this meal. I called my Aunt, to talk about my grandfather who'd just died, and I told her about Panya's thesis and her mother's cups, and sent her the story and a picture, and she sent me a picture of a pot that she fired in cow dung, on the Snake River in Idaho, in 1971, when she was a student at Bard.

My final thought is a recollection of a bone that I found on the walk that I described above - a round bone that appeared as a flash of light at the bottom of a brook. I swam down to retrieve it and it was a round bone, that had been cut. As I turned it over in my hand, and look at the mountainside and the rocks by the brook, I realized that thirty years before, I had camped on the mountainside above the brook, and we had cooked a piece of meat from our freezer, from a yearling calf we had slaughtered. When we were done we threw the bones in the fire. Over the years, the bone found its way into the brook. I have this bone among a pile of other bones that I found, from things that I ate, on my desk. But when I found this bone, I was reading Anne Carson, I had her book "The Unlost" in my backpack. In this she talks about the symbolon, how in the ancient world after a meal the guest and host would break a bone, and each half would be a contract, a form of currency - that one's descendants could use the bone to show hospitality, that their ancestors had eaten together.

That night, we were among all of our ancestors, remembering them, feeding their spirits, creating new bonds of hospitality.

Thanks for the opportunity to have this experience, and to reflect on it!

Amish

Appendix C:

**A Written Remembrance of the last Open House by Valérie Frappier**

Hey Panya!

Here attached is my reflection on the fabulous April 20 open house at your magical casa.

Please feel free to edit as necessary, especially if it's too lengthy or if I spelled a guest's name wrong!

Thanks again for a wonderful evening, and so glad I could be part of your project.

Best of luck with the last revisions — you're gonna kick ass!!

Val

“The Feast” Open House Reflection by Valérie Frappier  
April 30, 2019

I had the chance to experience and participate in the culmination of the April “Feast” weekend for the launch of Panya and Elín’s *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* publication by attending the last scheduled open house, on Saturday April 20. With the open house set from 2-7pm, I arrive at Panya’s home at 5:30pm, finding a medley of people from all different corners of the globe gathered around the table. Present is Irene (Netherlands), Miguel (Mexico), Sandra (Latvia), Ana Elia (Spain), Peter (Ukraine ancestry), and of course our gracious hosts Panya (Irish ancestry) and Elín (Iceland), as well as myself (French Canadian ancestry). People’s lineage and family history is introduced into the discussion very organically and an inclusive atmosphere of sharing sets me instantly at ease.

Before long, fine foods and drink are being passed around the table, among them a traditional Icelandic cake, fresh guacamole, tamales and chorizo, with wine and specialized tequila. As these delicacies get passed around, guests become even more comfortable with each other, with all sorts of anecdotes being made in connection to food, community and travel. In relation to the event’s theme, we come upon the topic of storytelling, specifically the importance of song to storytelling. Ana Elia reflects on how she has been writing down songs from different parts of the world for some time now, in an attempt to document the stories and worldviews these songs manifest. Opening her hand-written songbook, she sings an Icelandic song acapella, casting a heavy spell upon the room. When she ends, she asks Elín if her wording was understandable (since she is not a native Icelandic speaker), and Elín responds it was

almost perfect. Ana Elia then tells a brief story of the time Elín, Panya and herself sang this song under a full moon in ode to the land, while on the shore of a lake in Iceland. Next, she flips through her book and finds a Dutch song from early 17<sup>th</sup> century, asking Irene if she is familiar with it. Irene responds no, however says she will sing it with Ana Elia. They do so, and another beautiful moment of cultural exchange is shared with the group. As the turn to sing comes around the table to me, I think of a French Canadian song I could share with the group. I jokingly start the first verse of “Alouette,” and everyone instantly joins in, familiar with the tune. In that moment, I think of the annual Christmas dinners I share with my large family on my mother’s side, and our ritual of singing songs around the table for hours on end—Christmas-themed or not. I think of how it is always my grandfather who starts off the singing, he being the most familiar with the lyrics and having memorized them long ago. I later try to sing my grandfather’s version of “La salope”—a funny French Canadian song, whose origins I am unsure of—but in my attempt, realize I only know the chorus and not the verses. In that moment, I become aware that I barely have the lyrics to one song I sing amongst family memorized, and how important it is to document these lyrical stories because, from generation to generation, they act as important moments of knowledge production and cultural affirmation.

The next time someone looks at a clock, is it well past 9pm, the open house hours long over. However, no one wants to leave, intuiting the very special nature of the gathering taking place. Panya suggests making a fire in the backyard, and so we migrate outside, bringing blankets and more stories to share. Toasting with a glass of champagne, songs of a more explicit nature are sung around the fire, as well as ideas of what a “career” in the arts means today, reflections on life paths and overcoming obstacles.

Appendix D:  
*On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* Book



Figures 29-31 *On Whaleroads and Boatmaking* Book