

flow

BIG WATERS

by Valerie LeBlanc and Daniel Dugas

There are many ways to map the world. In essence, a map is a set of coordinates that allow an interpreter to visit a geographical location. In a broader sense, a map can arguably be a set of musical notations or mental notes that recreate the atmosphere of an event. Essential personal coordinates of dates and passwords are used to map or describe personal identity itself. To recognize and maintain an interior set of grounding points becomes increasingly important, as all aspects of our physical world become the focus of mapping and tagging.

The information systems now available through the Internet continue to change our world vision. For artists, this means that the work can be seen and experienced in locations other than their immediate surroundings. We now live within the perception and reality of a much larger landscape, so our concerns grow within the awareness of that wider window. For example, as more people subscribe to the Internet, broader worldviews emerge. With increased participation, the opinion of each voice must be taken into account. As this

expanded reality forms, the world shrinks. As world events stream into our homes and consciousness, what is happening 'over there' shifts location as well.

FLOW: Big Waters could fall into the category of what Kenneth White¹ has labelled geopoetics. Each element of the project has its own working parameters, based on video poetry, photographs and sound mapping; in other words, each aspect is a project in itself. The various parts have been constructed from the distillation of our on-site research, Internet and print researched data. We have tried to connect the dots linking our personal perceptions to a larger sense of the physical world. Poetics are the basis of our inquiry. While the plans for *FLOW: Big Waters* essentially started with research carried out in our home studio in January 2014, the project grew as various elements were created in South Florida and later in Southeast New Brunswick. The final installation, which was launched as an online soundmap on March 1, 2016, included a selection of videos, photographs, and sound works.

everglades, shifting baseline, ecology, ruins, sub-tropic, swamp



Mangrove roots, Paurotis Pond. Photograph: LeBlanc/Dugas, 2014, Everglades National Park, FL



Late afternoon, Big Cypress National Preserve.
Photograph: LeBlanc/Dugas, 2015, Airboat Excursion
north of the Tamiami Trail, FL

Origins of *FLOW: Big Waters*

The US National Park Service and AIRIE – Artists in Residence in the Everglades – invited us to work in the Park for the month of July 2014.² We went there to start our project based on creative story-lines. Our experience of working in media arts is holistic and the idea of interconnectivity in the Park’s ecosystem captured our attention. We were visualizing it on macro and micro levels: the relationships between the Everglades geography and its inhabitants; those living close to its borders; and those, like ourselves, who go there to commune with the environment. In trying to understand more of where this unique landscape sits in the global scheme of planetary assets, we examined the components and networks that make up the Everglades. Through that we came to better appreciate the fresh water filtering systems breathing beneath its surfaces.

In addition to the subtropical intensity of the natural flora and fauna, the history of human presence in this complex environment was calling out to us. Ranger Maria Thomson, our National Park Service liaison, informed us that our arrival coincided with the time when ‘all of the little things hatch’. From the outset, poetic visions were rising from the marshes and swamps...

Swamp as metaphor

The swamp is a place that has captivated the human imagination since the beginning of time. In the Middle Ages, the miasma theory held that gas emitted by the swamps caused disease and even death. This theory was dismissed in the 19th century, but the metaphor of the swamp as a sinister and forbidding place has been carried into the vernacular language of today. When we are busy, we say we are *swamped*, and when we have too much work, we say we are *bogged down*.

The swamp has long been an important inspiration for artists and writers. Irish poet Thomas Moore wrote *The Lake of the Dismal Swamp* (1806). In the movie *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bates pushes Marion’s car into a dark bog, and in *The Never Ending Story* (1984), Atreyu struggles in the deadly Swamp of Sadness. There is also the fictional *Swamp Thing*, the half humanoid, half plant creature of the DC Comics (1971) and the *Swamp of Sorrows*, a contested territory in the online game, *World of Warcraft* (2006). Closer to everyday life, the swamp is sometimes the backdrop of TV reality shows. *Swamp People* (2010) and *Swamp Hunters* (2012) are two examples.

Swamps are sometimes viewed negatively, but not always. Henry David Thoreau wrote about swamps many times during his lifetime, viewing them as temples, sources of new life. ‘I enter a swamp as a sacred place.’³ Swamps are among the most valuable ecosystems on Earth, functioning as gigantic filtering systems. With *FLOW: Big Waters*, we have explored the idea of swamp as a metaphor for decay and ruin, and also as a transformative agent of the physical and spiritual.

Being there (and here)

We flew in from the north. As we approached Miami, the pilot made a garbled announcement about the weather while swerving to miss storm cells. The downpour started in earnest a few hours after we landed. The rain was heavy, the sky black. It was a big storm, the first tropical storm of the 2014 Atlantic hurricane season. Forming in the Caribbean, these storms often follow the Gulf Stream current and affect the Atlantic region of Canada where we live. Strengthening to become Hurricane Arthur, this one was tracking northward and our hometown was in the middle of its path. A slew of warnings was posted on the Environment Canada website: tropical storm,



Mangrove island, Photograph: LeBlanc/Dugas, 2014, Chokoloskee Bay, Everglades National Park, FL

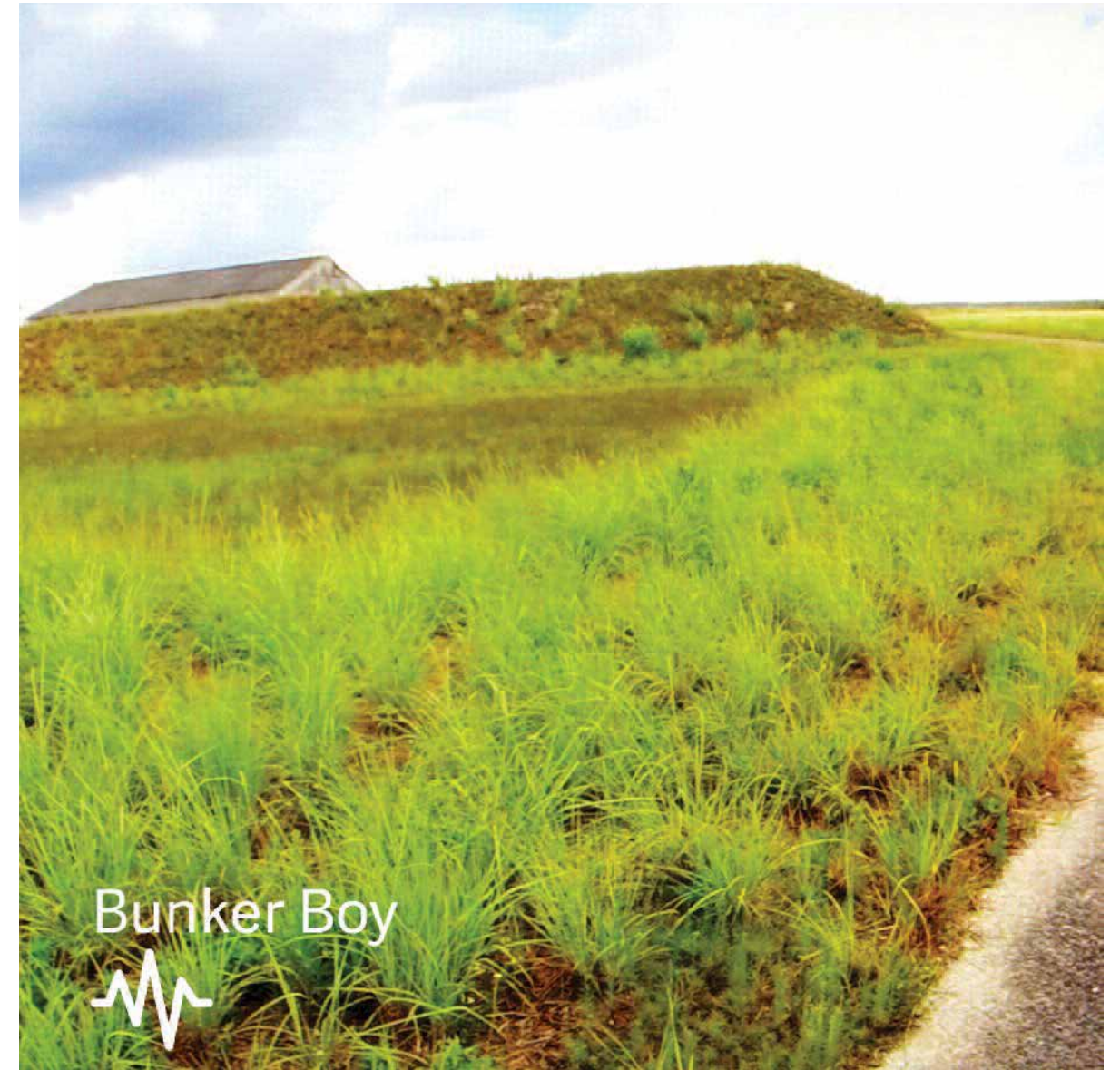


Excerpt from: *Chekika, the Abandoned*

She saw a photograph of the Chekika Fountain and it struck her as a remnant of a lost paradise. It opened one of those aesthetic wounds that had to be traced back to its source. At the end of the road, she stopped the car and braced herself to enter that forbidden territory of abandoned buildings and unkempt grounds that announced its state of ruin. She passed under the chained gate.

All was overgrown with green and threatening to house dangerous snakes. In the Park Ranger's kiosk, an empty file cabinet and a shop vac hinted of catastrophic disaster. As if the humans walked out one day, never to return, it resembled the Chernobyl photographs without the ruins of the funfair.

Chekika, the Abandoned, soundwork, 2016. Photograph: LeBlanc/Dugas, Chekika Day Use Area, Everglades National Park, FL



Excerpt from: *Bunker Boy*

The Jeep goes down Ingraham Road. The driver and Bunker Boy stop at bunker #3. The driver says good luck and drives back to the base. Bunker Boy looks at the Jeep for a second, then steps inside the shelter and closes the steel door behind him. There, he's got a worktable, a radio, a pair of headphones, pencils, paper, a bed, water and lights. The phone hangs on the wall. He flips a switch, the power comes on, the fan starts to turn and the air moves. He sits at the table, presses a few buttons on a panel and puts his headphones on. Bunker Boy closes his eyes. He's working.

He scans the sky with his ears. Outside, crickets chirp and frogs croak, but he can't hear them. They mean nothing to world politics. His ears are open for other frequencies, other proofs of life. He listens for days on end, fill his pads with possible leads, launches, probable attacks. The world stops breathing when the signal fizzles out.

Bunker Boy, soundwork, 2016. Photograph: LeBlanc/Dugas, HM69 Nike Missile Base, Everglades National Park, FL

rainfall, high winds, special weather statements and a tropical cyclone information statement. We followed the evolution of Arthur and worried for our house. At the last moment, it veered left. Our home in Canada got a good soaking, but not the anticipated deluge. It was amazing to arrive in Florida in time to witness the birth of a storm that moved northward to die just outside our doorstep. And it was a reminder of the interconnectedness of all things.

Ecologically speaking, our understanding and experience of the Everglades is a relatively short moment in time. The area is not a swamp at all, but a slow moving fresh water river or River of Grass.⁴ Increased urban settlement, farming expansion and large-scale engineering projects that re-directed freshwater flow were mainly begun in the latter part of the 19th century. Those practices were quickly deemed harmful to the baseline fresh water levels of the region and prompted ecologists to call for reversals. December 6, 1947 marked a key moment in the history of ecological lobbying dedicated to the creation of the Everglades National Park. That is when the US federal government followed up on the bill to acquire the lands necessary to define the Park boundaries.⁵ It was also when a complicated program of future land acquisition and restoration of historical water levels began. Since then, many more private organizations and individuals have joined efforts to raise public awareness and funding for the Park. Houston Cypress, Miccosukee tribe member and executive director of the Otter Clan,⁶ is one such individual. While presenting at the *AnthropoScene Conference*, University of Miami (March 2015), we had the privilege of taking an

airboat tour of the Big Cypress swamps north of the Tamiami Trail. As Houston's guests, we visited the family's island home. The reality of being there, in that traditional settlement, brought many aspects of our research together.

We have collaborated for over 25 years on various projects, and the kinds of collaborations we do are diverse. Often we work within a framework that allows for individual sensitivities to bubble to the surface. This is the case with the *FLOW: Big Waters* project. As we hiked and explored, we experienced the same locations from our individual perspectives. At the end of the day, we reviewed the video footage, photographs and soundtracks, highlighting our favourites. From there, we worked on the poems and stories that our research inspired. Sometimes we revisited sites to gather additional material.


During the first few days in the Everglades, we covered as much ground as possible, recording ambient sound, the weather, and the insects as we went. Mosquitos hit the shotgun mic with anger at sunrise and sunset, and we walked in the warm waters of the slough at Pa-hay-okee during the daylight hours. When we tried to hike among the mangroves at Christian Point Trail,⁷ we were driven back by overgrowth and hungry insects. We were in a world of layers and had to struggle through the mosquitos, mosquito nets, humidity, heat stress and DEET. On some days, each task was monumental, with every clap of thunder and every raindrop intensifying and maximizing the experience. We quickly learned to operate within the

environment. To be out there each day required consistent preparation and backup supplies of batteries and water. Because audio recording demands silence and stillness, we were the obvious target for hordes of skeeters. In the spirit of adaptation, we developed Tai Chi-like movements to silently repel them away from the microphone pickup area. This slow motion waving of blue rubber gloved hands became the symbol of a certain level of peace.

Being here (and there): comparative glances at restoration models
If a comparison is necessary when speaking of two geographical regions, the links between the Fundy Biosphere Reserve⁸ (UNESCO, 2007) and the Everglades Biosphere (Everglades & Dry Tortugas – first designated by UNESCO as a World Reserve in 1976) are not difficult to find. We share the winds and the water currents that carry fish, migratory birds, and insects north to us in the warmer weather and south to Florida and the Everglades in the winter. Both regions are carrying out long-range watershed restoration programs. In spite of these efforts to restore, preserve and protect the South Florida ecosystem, UNESCO placed the Everglades back on the list of Sites in Danger in 2010 because of 'serious and continuing degradation of its aquatic ecosystem'.⁹ One problem in Florida is that rising sea levels are leeching underground into decreased baseline levels of fresh water. In many of the mainland and Florida Key pinelands, the vegetation is suffering from saltwater infiltration. When UNESCO designated the Bay of Fundy as a biosphere reserve in 2007, the designation came with the responsibility of opening the causeway that had blocked the Petitcodiac River's flow since its construction in 1968. The causeway gates were opened in April

2010 and the tidal flow that permits fish to travel freely upstream was restored. The channel downstream of the causeway widened and higher water volumes increased the river's capacity to flush itself of ocean silts.

Of all the layers contained in the Everglades National Park, it was the human presence and interaction that became the focus of our work. Whether it was the recently abandoned Chekika day use area, Nike Missile Base HM-69 or the Deer Pen ruins near Paradise Key, all these traces revealed something about human intervention within natural settings. Trace elements become covered, overgrown, eaten or corroded as plants, animals and climate reclaim them. Within the operating forces of nature, overgrown sites can be seen as *memento mori*, reminders of mortality. At the same time, they are also evidence of life reverberating...

Projects sometimes overlap and the inspiration for new works can rise out of the process. *Visible/Invisible* has been growing out of *FLOW: Big Waters* and we plan to continue to develop it as a series of performance works and workshops. It is based on the idea of creating a less intrusive passage in the landscape, of leaving land in the same condition as it was found. To date, the performances have taken place in Southeastern New Brunswick and in Miami, Florida. 

For more information and updates on the project, please go to: <http://flow.basicbruegel.com>



TOP
Death in the Morning – water, 2014. Duration: 1 min 57 sec video still, layered image: video by LeBlanc/Dugas and image from the Library of Congress.

Reflection on the value of a human life is presented as a series of imagined last thoughts of Guy Bradley, the Audubon Warden, killed in 1905 while trying to protect a bird rookery in Florida Bay.

BOTTOM
Yonder, 2014. Duration: 1 min 47 sec video still, layered image: video by LeBlanc/Dugas – giant topiaries on the landscape in Hole-in-the-Donut (HID), Everglades National Park

The Everglades National Park has recently scrapped the HID in an effort to eradicate the exotic invasive plant Brazilian Pepper.

TOP
Moving in the Landscape: Visible/Invisible – South, with Traia Thiel

BOTTOM
Moving in the Landscape: Visible/Invisible – North, with Valerie LeBlanc

A selection from the *FLOW: Big Waters* soundworks program was presented at:

- *Subtropics Marathon 2016*, Audiotheque studios, Miami Beach, FL (March 2016)

Different versions of the *FLOW: Big Waters* video program have been shown at:

- *In Conversation with AIRIE*, PAMM Auditorium, Perez Art Museum Miami, FL (Dec 2015)
- *FILE 2015* – Electronic Language International Festival, Sao Paulo, Brazil (June-July 2015)
- *Subtropics Marathon 2015*, Audiotheque studios, Miami Beach, FL (March 2015)
- *AnthropoScene: Art and Nature in a Manufactured Era*, University of Miami, FL (March 2015)
- *AIRIE in the Garden*, Pinecrest, FL (Jan 2015)
- *The Swamp pop-up lounge*, Miami Bookfair, Miami, FL (Nov 2014)

Other related presentations:

- Developing *FLOW: Big Waters*, Creative arts summer camp (MOCA, Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami), Dante Fascell Center, Biscayne National Park, FL
- Photographic works from the project are held in the collection of the US National Park Service and the New Brunswick Art Bank

NOTES

1. Defining Geopoetics, Kenneth White first coined the term in 1979
<http://trans.revues.org/299>
2. AIRIE – Artists in Residence in Everglades, Inc, <http://airie.org/>

National Park Service, <http://www.nps.gov/ever/index.htm>

3. 'Walking,' The Portable Thoreau, p. 613
4. Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, <http://www.miccosukee.com/tribe/>
Marjory Stoneman Douglas coined this name, 1947, in her book of the same name. It is described as a call to attention about the degrading quality of life in the Everglades. In their own language, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians use the word 'Kahayatlle' to refer to the shimmering waters of this natural area. Ms. Douglas traced the etymology of the word 'Everglades', revealing that it originated from the same description of the quality of light glimmering on the grassy waters.
5. Everglades Digital Library, *A Tale of Two Women, Marjory Stoneman Douglas and Marjorie Harris Carr*: <http://everglades.fiu.edu/two/contents.htm>
6. Otter Vision website, <http://www.ottervisionuniversal.com/>
7. Christian Point Trail got its name when bodies washed up there after the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane.
8. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/biosphere-reserves/europe-north-america/canada/fundy/>
9. World Heritage Committee inscribes Everglades National Park on List of World Heritage in Danger, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/638/>



Exotic vs. Exotic, 2014. Duration: 1 min 48 sec video still, layered image: video by LeBlanc/Dugas, and the Florida Memory Archives.

The Burmese python was introduced and established in the Florida Everglades as a result of the exotic pet trade. There are currently no reliable estimates of the total number of pythons in the invasive population. From early 2000 to mid-October 2011, more than 1,786 pythons were removed from the National Park.