



# Semá:th X\_ó:tša & the River in the Sky

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## Personal Intros & Land Acknowledgement: MD

*Semá:th X\_ó:tša & the River in the Sky*

*Hello, my name is Astrida Neimanis, I am an Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in feminist environmental humanities at the UBC Okanagan.*

Good afternoon, my name is Madeline Donald. I'm currently a PhD candidate at UBC Okanagan. We are recording this presentation from and in collaboration with the Okanagan watershed, in unceded and occupied syilx territory. This is the place we both currently live as visitors, and some 250 km east of the body of water we will talk about today.



In a time of increasing climate instability, marginal and marginalized “fringe natures” such as Semá:th X\_ó:t̓sa teach us about the possibilities of living as part of an expanded littoral zone, where anticolonial, feminist and queer-trans modes of watery being might flourish.

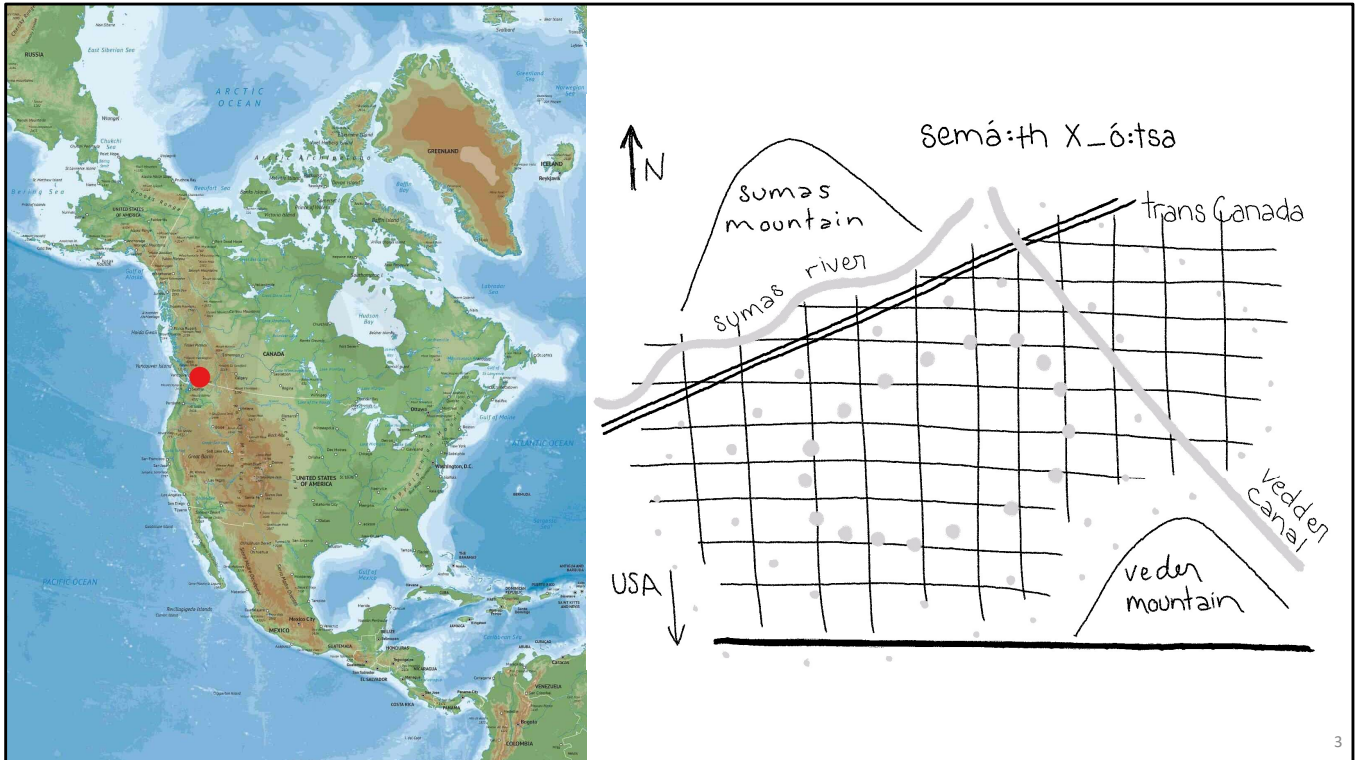
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## Introduction: AN

This paper is a shortened version of a longer paper that Madi and I recently wrote about the atmospheric river event in the lower mainland of BC, Canada in November 2021. It is anchored in the story of Semá:th X\_ó:t̓sa, the Sto:lo name for a water body in the Fraser Valley. While a century of colonial rule transformed this seasonally changeable shallow lake into a highly engineered agricultural prairie, the catastrophic flooding of November 2021 brought the return of Semá:th X\_ó:t̓sa in its expanded lake form. Our paper begins with the story of the spectacle of that river in the sky, where elements-out-of-place signal the need to rethink the way we understand and categorize bodies of water. We propose that the deployment of trans ecological conceptual frames offer an alternative anticolonial land/water imaginary that can address both the need to learn from Sto:lo histories



of thriving alongside elemental instability, as well as the urgency of living under present and future climate instability. Marginal and marginalised “fringe natures” such as Semá:th X\_ó:t̓sa, moreover, teach us about the possibilities of living as part of an expanded littoral zone, where anticolonial, feminist and queer-trans modes of watery being might flourish.



## Location: MD

Sumas valley, unceded and occupied Sto:lo territory, lies within the Fraser River watershed. Today the valley's prairie bottom hosts a meaningful proportion of the commercial agricultural production in the province of BC. But before the chickens, potatoes, and valley-bottom blueberries, there was a lake. This lake-place, Semá:th X\_ó:tša, varied in size throughout the year, stretching the expanse of the valley at high water. Water moved through on its way to the Fraser River, gathering and pooling, welcoming and nourishing a plethora of fish, birds, insects, soils, humans, and more.

The lake's annual variation in extent, depth, and temperature played a major part in the ebb and flow of Stó:lō livelihood activities and served as a regional gathering place in both summer and winter.

Upon arrival in the valley European settlers quickly noticed extravagant grasses growing when freshet receded in mid summer. With aspirations to establish agricultural settlements they moved into Sto:lo territory without consent, and diverted, culverted, and drained Semá:th X\_ó:tša.

Currently, life in the Sumas valley is rife with paradox. Rich soils created by centuries of seasonal sediment deposition resulting from ebbing lake and river waters attracted early-arrival agriculturalists. Now, for 100 years—a very short story in the long life of Semá:th X\_ó:tša—the ebb and flow has been suppressed. Despite efforts towards governance and control, the lake maintains its prominence in the valley. Pumps run constantly to move water out of the valley-bottom and into the river, flood risk is high in most parts of the prairie, and anthropocentric infrastructure periodically fails to match water's determination.





### **November 2021 and the river in the sky: MD**

In November of last year, a series of tropical atmospheric rivers flowed to temperate southern BC. These rivers arrived as immense rainfall, warm air to melt the early season snow, and ferocious runoff facilitated by clear cut logging and the previous summer's high-intensity forest fires. It became impossible to maintain the Sumas valley's prairie bottom; Semá:th X\_ó:tša took its lake form once again. Many tenants of industrial agri-culture suffered during and as a result of this event: farm animals died and were rescued, humans were displaced and lost their homes, perineal crops suffered wet feet for longer than they could handle.

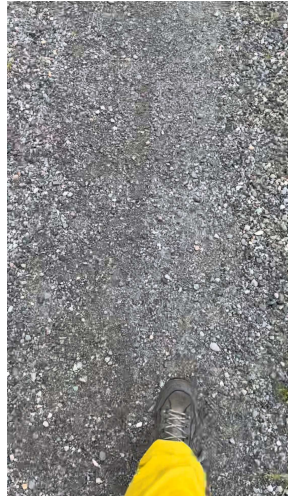
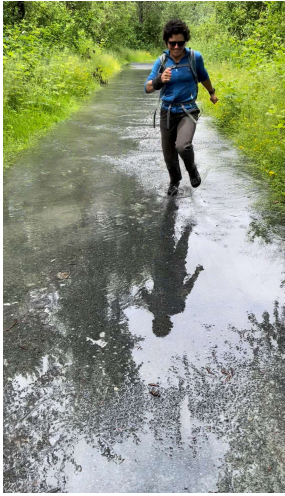


## Semá:th X\_ó:tša, a transy body

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### Sema:th X\_otsa, a transy body: AN

Ways of living well with Semá:th X\_ó:tša under conditions of full Sto:lo sovereignty show us that this body of water is a pretty transy figure. This word signals our use of trans scholarship coming out of the field of gender studies. Importantly, we also draw on scholars such as Kim Tallbear, Leanne Betasamosake, Madeline Whetung, who underscore the way colonial sex-gender imaginaries inform *all* power relations, including human-environmental ones. In the words of Cleo Wolfe Hazard, whose work we also substantially cite, a “trans theory of watershed embodiment” can “sharpen and focus these narratives of unsettling” (p. 134) to act in solidarity with Indigenous nations (in this case, the Sto:lo) working towards LANDBACK.



transecological theory: movement across,  
border curiosity, living differently in relation

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#### bodies of water + trans theory: AN

Thinking with trans theory draws our attention to bodies and places *of and as* movement. Trans means to “move across.” The relationship of transing bodies to borders is neither categorical affirmation nor denunciation, but one of curiosity – i.e., being curious about the work of borders, their usefulness, and their violent enforcement. Trans ecological theories, specifically, remind us that non-human worlds are and have always been moving, changing, shifting, and that transitioning, or transing—not simply as a temporary phase on the way to a more important or more stable state, but as a way of being in itself—is not pathological, but entirely common, and “natural” (see also Freyne, 2020; Seymour, 2020). Trans theory argues that the desire to perceive stable states (an ecological body as either land *or* water, for example) is related to Western binary thinking linked to (and



even anchored in) how these systems of thought also understand gendered bodies (Plumwood, 2003).

Transitional spaces are place-times at or on the fringe, where affirmative “yearning against” colonial and gender-normative borders and strictures can be enlivened, and where the abundance of marginal and marginalized zones is affirmed.

Transecologies affirm border play across bodies (e.g., land and water), but also across times—looking back and forwards at once. As Eva Hayward, asserts, there is a “vertiginous joy at being unable either to turn back or to continue as before; new ways, transways, transselves are required of us here” (p. 105). Transitioning environments are not pathological, in need of correction or stabilization.

Transecologies can teach us about different ways of living in relation.

fringe natures



Semá:th X\_ó:t̓sa is neither 'lake' nor 'prairie'

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### bodies of water as transy, cont.: AN

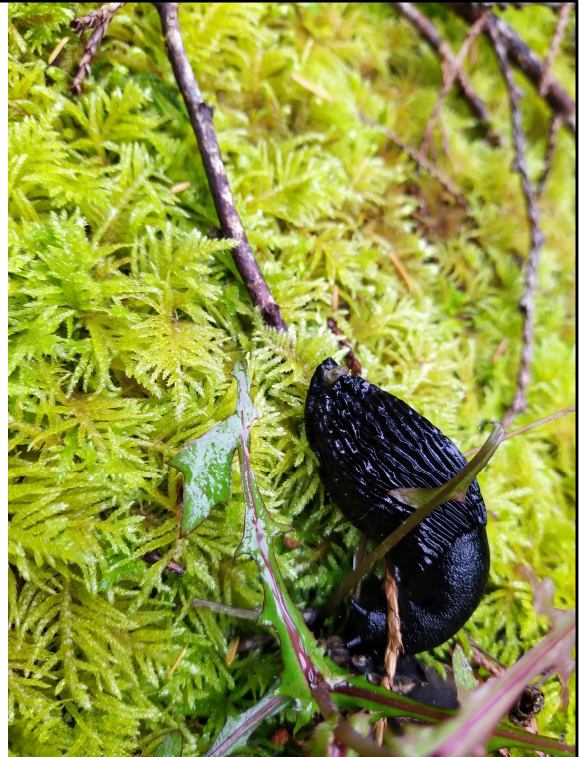
For Wölfle Hazard (2022), “the watershed body” is always “a kind of body-in-transition” (p. 110). We bring this understanding to Semá:th X\_ó:t̓sa too. Semá:th X\_ó:t̓sa is neither “lake” nor “prairie”; it is a transing place-body, always in movement, consistently becoming anew in a dance of seasons, weather, climate, and community relations. Its inherent border curiosity is repressed by the settler imaginary that treats it as a drained and fallibly engineered floodplain as though this is the only way it could ever be. On increasingly frequent occasion, infrastructural restrictions on its transiness lead dykes and levees to seep and break, and containment mechanisms fail to contain. As climate change rubs up against the anthropogenic insistence on lake/water binaries, results are increasingly disastrous, as we saw in November 2021.

Bringing queer and trans ecologies to Semá:th X\_ó:tša can affirm a necessary curiosity around these settler containment paradigms. What if, countering the settler idea that this place needed to be “fixed”, we become curious about such ambivalent or fringe spaces as sites of pleasure and possibility, and as places of ecological and social significance, where a watershed body, as Wölfle Hazard muses, could be “most joyous, bountiful and most vibrantly itself” (p. 129)?

We thus propose “fringe natures” as an operational concept for telling an alternative story of Semá:th X\_ó:tša. “Fringe” here refers not only to a real environmental phenomenon, i.e.. the littoral zone, or where terrestrial and aquatic habitats meet, but also to the epistemological and symbolic dimensions of fringiness, as marginal, marginalized, submerged or emergent – in this case, queer trans and anticolonial ways of understanding land-water bodies. Existing at the frayed edges of what is securely knowable and categorizable (i.e., land *or* water), fringe natures inspire us to ask what knowledges are submerged and emergent in response to the given context. The concept of “fringe natures” thus helps us a understand what Semá:th X\_ó:tša actually *is*: neither Sumas Lake nor Sumas Prairie, but a fringe elementality better fit for the climate instability we must learn to live with.



How do we learn to live with elements out of place, such as rivers in the sky, while also mitigating the reasons that they are proving so disastrous?



#### Implications: MD

The littoral is a habitat of land and water, at each of their edges they meet, ebb, flow, and articulate their mutual inextricability. We experience the littoral at shorelines and river edges, places where wet and dry come with question marks. As the climate increases its power, we find question marks in places unexpected, elements out of place, rivers in the sky.

“Atmospheric rivers are long narrow bands of water flying through the air,” explained poet Matt Radar in a lecture earlier this year. The image of a river in the sky, he goes on to speculate, is powerful enough to be in some way commensurate with the power we’ve experienced recently. How do we learn to live with elements out of place, such as rivers in the sky, while also mitigating the reasons that they are proving so disastrous?



We are now living in an expanded littoral zone, where boundaries are matters of contingency.

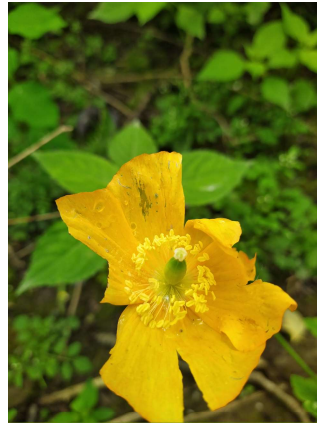
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### The expanded littoral zone: MD

We are now living in an expanded littoral zone, where wet and dry are temporary and contingent descriptors. “Bodies of water are not containable,” Wölfle-Hazard reminds us. “They overflow their banks in floods, or they seep away and go dry: the boundary is always a matter of contingency.” To inhabit this expanded littoral zone is to be attentive to these contingences.

“Semá:th X\_ó:tša” does not exist in a dichotomous wet/dry imaginary. While this Sto:lo name already holds within it a necessary contingency of terrestrial-aquatic categories, in settler languages such as English, neither “lake” nor “prairie” will do, loaded as these words are with fixed separability. As a well-versed fringe nature, Semá:th X\_ó:tša has much to teach us of life in an expanded littoral zone.





a  
volumetric,  
extra-  
hydrated  
place



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### An expanded littoral zone, in more detail: MD

A terrestrial river's littoral zone is the riparian community of beings who thrive in and co-create an extra-hydrated place in a saddle of the land. Though depicted as planar on a map, these zones reach above and below ground, through growth, decomposition, travel, and evapotranspiration. Here in the Okanagan watershed big trees such as cottonwoods are said to be vertical rivers, modifying and extending seasons and climate experience for their neighbours.

An atmospheric river's littoral zone is it's surrounding weather: the clouds in the sky, the announcements made on the radio, the spectacle of flood, or the circumstance of high water. Defined by altitude rather than width, atmospheric rivers above, like aquifers and hyporheic flows below, move the spatial dimensions of the littoral zone above and beyond the height of a cottonwood tree. Exceeding



the spatial, these volumetrics unfold temporally as well, from day to night, through the march of seasons, with shifts in political dominance, and through changing climates.

Semá:th X\_ó:tsa teaches of seasonal variation in temperature, depth, breadth, and inhabitants; conversation and compromise with those who wish to see it otherwise; and the relative nature of the spectacular. These are the teachings that will inform effective decision making in this expanded littoral zone.

living  
and  
learning  
with



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#### Conclusion: MD

In conclusion, in a time of increasing climate instability, “fringe natures” such as Semá:th X\_ó:tša should be imagined as part of an expanded littoral zone, where forcible maintenance of fixed binary categories can no longer hold. In this expanded littoral zone, we might articulate modes of relating to water in which not only Semá:th X\_ó:tša might flourish, but so too might other anticolonial, feminist, and queer-trans modes of being.

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Thank you to the beings and bodies of Semá:th X\_ó:t̓sa, now and since time immemorial.

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