ON THIS PATCH OF GRASS

City Parks on Occupied Land

Daisy Couture, Sadie Couture,
Selena Couture and Matt Hern

With Denise Ferreira da Silva,
Glen Coulthard, Erick Villagomez

Fernwood Publishing
Halifax & Winnipeg

https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/resources/on-this-patch-of-grass

Editing: Fazeela Jiwa and Brenda Conroy
Text design: Brenda Conroy
Cover images: Hal Ozart and Zac Sturgeon
Cover design: Tania Craan
eBook: tikaebooks.com
Printed and bound in Canada

Published by Fernwood Publishing
32 Oceanvista Lane, Black Point, Nova Scotia, B0J 1B0
and 748 Broadway Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3G 0X3
www.fernwoodpublishing.ca

Fernwood Publishing Company Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada, the Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Tourism under the Manitoba Publishers Marketing Assistance Program and the Province of Manitoba, through the Book Publishing Tax Credit, for our publishing program. We are pleased to work in partnership with the Province of Nova Scotia to develop and promote our creative industries for the benefit of all Nova Scotians. We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested $153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country.

Canada Canada Council for the Arts Conseil des arts du Canada NOVA SCOTIA Manitoba

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

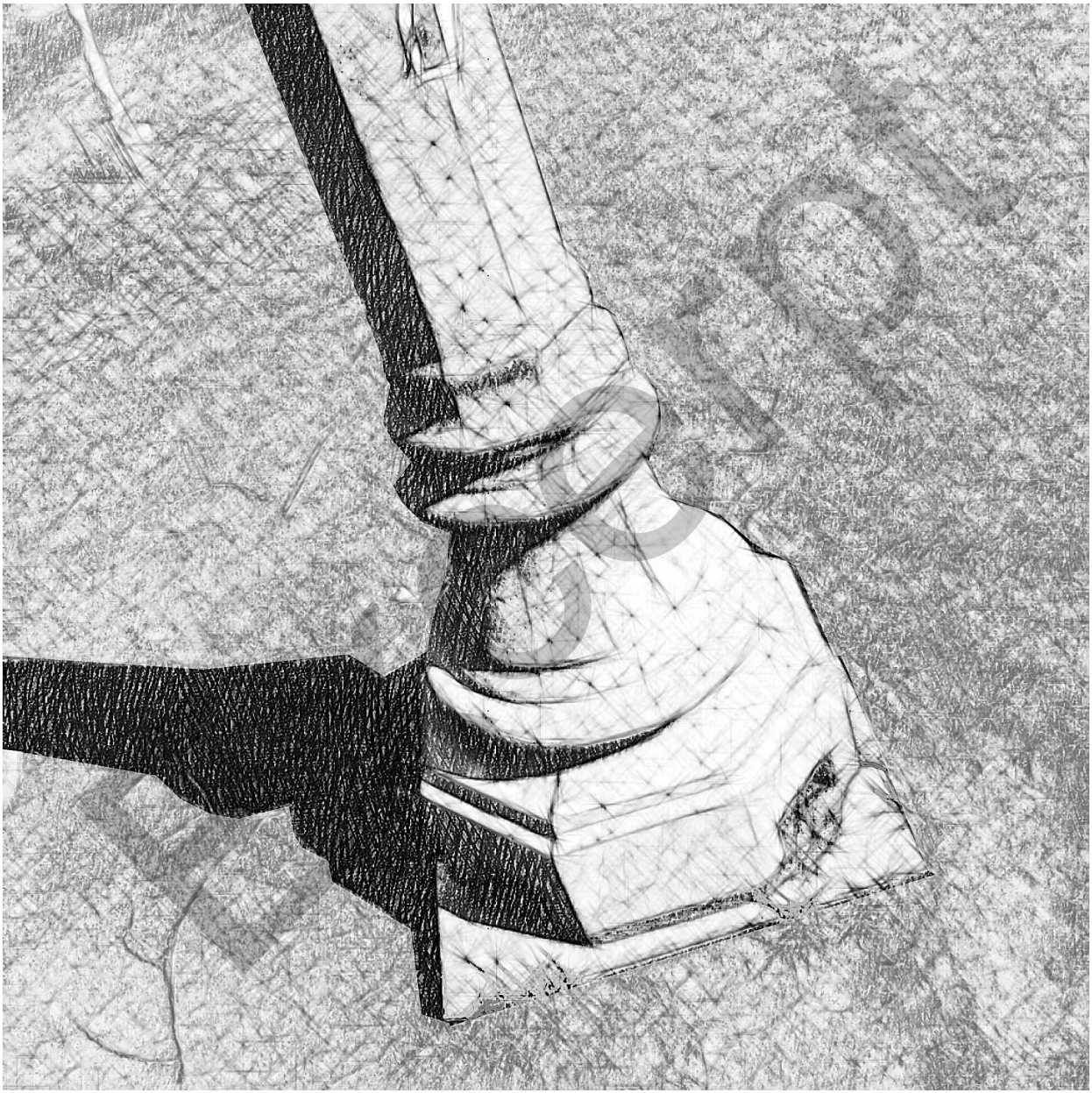
On this patch of grass: city parks on occupied land / Daisy Couture, Sadie Couture, Selena Couture and Matt Hern with Denise Ferreira da Silva, Glen Coulthard, Erick Villagomez

Includes bibliographical references.
Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-1-77363-070-0 (softcover).—ISBN 978-1-77363-071-7 (EPUB).—
ISBN 978-1-77363-072-4 (Kindle)

1. Urban parks—Political aspects—British Columbia—Vancouver.
2. Urban parks—Social aspects—British Columbia—Vancouver.
I. Hern, Matt, 1968-. Building better landscapes

FC3847.65.O5 2018 363.6'80971133 C2018-903708-3
C2018-904498-5

CONTENTS



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In some ways, this whole book is an expression of gratitude and love for where we live and the people and the other-than-humans we live amongst. We do want to note though some of the people who specifically helped us in the creation of this book.

First, thanks as always, to our immediate neighbours and the many, many others who have lived here, beside and with us, over the all these years. Our love goes to the wider group of dear friends who make living in this city worth it. You know who you are, and with luck you will hear some of your voices in here.

Second, our gratitude is owed to Glen Coulthard, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Erick Villagomez and everyone who was interviewed for this book. Without all your voices, this book would be impossible.

Third, our thanks go to Fernwood Publishing for their generous support of this complicated hybrid work; especially to Candida Hadley for her kind attentiveness, patience and incisive thinking, and to Beverley Rach, Fazeela Jiwa and Brenda Conroy for their forbearance as we assembled all the pieces.

And finally, much love to our families, extended and otherwise — on Vancouver Island, Ontario, and scattered widely — for their continuing care and love and cynicism.

Foreword

THE COLONIAL RESIDENT QUESTION

Having lived in this particular corner of the Pacific Northwest, on the Musqueam First Nation Reserve, for three years, recently I found myself walking along the trails in Pacific Spirit Park with a feeling — yes, I do mean feeling — that there is something I will never grasp. Though I do not recall precisely how it was when I did not have this feeling, I do know that it was not there at first. It came later, slowly, and became more intense the more I became used to the beauty of the forest, the gentle but indelible summer light seeping through the trees, the rugged grounds with fallen leaves, the muddy paths, filled with puddles, in the winter, the first touches of colour that announce spring. Every time I walk on these ancestral Musqueam grounds, this stretch of temperate rain forest greets me as a recently arrived colonial resident (a settler) who was born and raised in a city also built on colonized lands. It gifts me with a different kind of appreciation for the question that, to me, permeates this family's love letter to this city and its ancestral custodians and colonial residents (settlers). I call it the colonial resident question.

The colonial resident question was — and still is — postponed. When it does surface, it comes to thought later: after the questioning of capital, after racial redress, after … but it rarely does. For the classic historical materialists, the colonial question is not even about to become relevant — not even after something was accomplished or a phase was completed. Nor had it a place in the political imaginary that animated the several lines of critical political discourse of the local and national struggles — communist, socialist, anti-racist, feminist, pro-LGBTI — that is, the whole gamut of political movements that consolidated in the 1980s. These movements for social justice addressed the state under the

assumption that it had the right to exist, that all that was needed was that the state included the rest of us, namely, the poor, Black, female, gay folks.

It is not that means of colonialization (conquest and slavery) have not been part of that political vocabulary. They have been. What is lacking is a formulation of the colonial resident question precisely because it immediately and instantaneously challenges that which these political movements want to accomplish by being heard by the state.

Now it is not a matter of finding a "proper" formulation of the question and all will be well, and the left/radical/critical/progressive political discourse will be finally complete. This is not a matter of time. Nor is it a matter of inclusion. The colonial resident question extends beyond the conceptual and existential elements comprehended by the modern political text.

What then? Reading *On this Patch of Grass*, I found myself, in several moments, thinking about whether or not it makes sense to try and articulate, as a question, the complications, contradictions and complexities of a political existence of the kind experienced by the colonial resident. Perhaps what we need is not so much another version of the political discourse but a different kind of composition — a fragmentary and yet directed and intended one, which like Daisy, Sadie, Selena and Matt's book, presents the colonial resident question with all its difficulties and without apology.

It may not meet the criteria of the political discourse; actually, it may fail it all together. Ethically and aesthetically, however, such composition might just get us a bit closer to the goal. For only such a composition — as a kind of text that articulates but does not resolve everything back in to a political position — might accommodate the ethical mandate to call into question our own existence, the one this book exposes so well. For there is a double demand to colonial residents, to all of us settlers who are defined by the feeling of never grasping the land: do not reproduce the violence and violations that render our living in occupied lands possible *and* that we support and, if invited, join in the struggle for returning the lands (and all the wealth expropriated from them since conquest) to their ancestral guardians, the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Musqueam First Nations, the ones who feel this land in all its fullness because they are one with it.

— Denise Ferreira da Silva, professor and director of the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice, University of British Columbia

1

CITY PARKS ON OCCUPIED LAND

> Is there *no* burden for the "descendant of colonial peoples"? Are there no burdens associated … being descended from those who have committed crimes against humanity, or living off the avails of these crimes? To deny this burden is to withhold a crucial truth; to refuse to shoulder and show this burden is to remain a bystander. (Carter 2015: 423–24)

Victoria Park, day 1. Photo by Daisy Couture

This is a book about parks and how parks act on stolen land. It is a book about occupation, which we mean in both senses: first, the occupation of Indigenous land by settlers, and second, how parks are occupied by pluralities of users. Our submission here is that thinking closely about the latter can shed some light on the former; that is, looking carefully at what parks do — how they behave and how they are deployed in cities — offers unique opportunities to catch a glimpse of a decolonial horizon.

Parks are particularly fertile places to talk about land. Whether referring to national parks, provincial campgrounds, isolated conservation areas, destination parks or humble urban patches of grass, people tend to speak of parks as unqualified good things — maybe the best possible use of land. It is easy to think of parks as land that makes all of us better.

But no park is innocent. Parks are lionized as "natural" oases, and urban parks are often spoken of as "nature" in the midst of the city — but that's absurd. Parks, urban or not, are exactly as "natural" as the roads or buildings around them, and they are just as political. Every park in North America is performing modernity and settler colonialism on an everyday basis. Parks occupy all kinds of middle grounds: they are not private property, they are called "public" places, and they are highly regulated. People like to think of parks as part of the "commons," but they normatively demand and closely control behaviours.

Cities are defined by land management policies; they discipline movement and demarcate who can occupy which space, why, where, how and when. Parks are a certain kind of property — usually owned by a level of the state and thus creations of law — but they are also subject to all kinds of cultural presumptions about what they are for and what kinds of people should be doing what kinds of things in them. Parks as they are currently constituted are always colonial enterprises.

As four white settlers living on səlil̓wətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) territory, we are interested in our relationships with this land and how to we might challenge and change our modes of living as colonial visitors. We encounter parks in everyday and bodily senses, and most particularly, we encounter one small park beside our house every day: Victoria Park, known mostly as Bocce Ball Park. This book is one small attempt to

confront our colonial attitudes toward land and to remake our relationships with parks, especially Victoria Park. There are four threads entwined in this project:

1. The first thread considers the uses and histories of parks (and specifically Bocce Ball Park) to understand and complicate how they have been, and are, deployed. We want to throw the occupation of parks into doubt.
2. The second piece notes the complicity of parks in creating and regulating narratives of control and domination that are bound up with race, class and gender. Parks, including Bocce Ball Park, are inflected heavily by performances of whiteness, and we want to continually poke at that.
3. At the same time, parks are key instruments of settler colonialism. Parks make arguments about the occupation of land and, as such, are colonial exercises. We ask how parks — and Bocce Ball Park in particular — actively construct colonial relations.
4. Finally, we are curious about how parks, and Bocce Ball Park especially, can be remade. Much is laudable about parks, and we are especially interested in how the overlapping and shared uses, the malleable sovereignties and the fluidity of parks might point to new ways to think about land and occupation.

We're not just four random people; we're part of a family. The eldest two of us — Matt and Selena — arrived in Vancouver in the summer of 1991, with Selena four months pregnant. Matt's friend Electra let us stay with her while we looked for jobs and a place to live. She lived in a studio apartment above a jewellery store on Commercial Drive, so we stretched out our camping mats under her kitchen table. Matt grew up on Vancouver Island and would come to the city for punk shows when he was a teenager, so he knew that this was the area we wanted to be in. It wasn't quite the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where we'd just been living, but it was the best place we could think of to have a baby.

Coming west was kind of like coming home for Matt, a fourth-generation descendent of English, Irish and French immigrants on the West Coast. However, for Selena (who grew up on Canadian military bases as a sixth-generation descendent of Irish settlers to Prince Edward

Island and an eleventh-generation descendent of French settlers to the lands south of Québec City), Vancouver, and East Vancouver in particular, was almost a foreign country. The money was the same, English was the main language (with hardly any French), and there was a surprising imprinting of Indigenous iconography around the city. It was the summer after the resistance at Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawá:ke,[1] and we had been involved in Indigenous solidarity work for several years in Ontario — not because we had any deep understanding of decolonization or anything, but because some wonderful and trusted older activist mentors gave us clear directions on how we might use our energies more effectively. Even though we had spent time in and with many Indigenous communities, our notions of solidarity were remarkably unsophisticated and vestigial.

We moved into East Vancouver and began enjoying the privileges of educated, white (if broke) young folks, like the walkable streets, cheap food and the diversity of personal expressions, sexualities and politics that made up the area at the time. We started volunteering for La Quena Coffeehouse, an anti-capitalist organizing space that supported struggles in Latin America, and through that space we made friends. In our limited understanding of Indigenous struggles at the time, we thought that they always occurred outside of cities and in faraway places. We had never heard the phrase "unceded territory." We vaguely knew there were some treaties that had been negotiated (and thereafter broken) for the territories our ancestors lived in, but we didn't know the details of them. Learning how to be a respectful visitor to these lands is a long process, and we are very far from confident in this; neither are we anything like resolved in our thinking. It is a fraught process in which there are no easy conclusions. Thinking hard and critically about our place here and understanding the history of settler development is a central part of it, but not all of it.

During Selena's pregnancy we walked a lot, often past Victoria Park; we were surprised to see the crowds of older men intensely playing bocce ball and gambling. On the first full day of her slowly developing labour, we went out for a walk to speed things along. As had become our habit, we hung out in the park. It was the middle of January 1992 and a surprisingly sunny day. Contractions were fierce, so we walked slowly, around and around the park's one square block. We weren't paying much

attention to other people, but we were happy to be out in the sun, and the bocce games were a good distraction from her contraction pains. Sadie was born the next day at 2:00 a.m.

Five years later, in the summer of 1997, we were still living beside the park, but in a different apartment, and now we were going there daily to play. As Selena laboured in a plastic wading pool filled with water in our bedroom to give birth to Daisy, a succession of friends came and took Sadie to play in Bocce Ball Park. And now, two decades later, we live on the far side of the park, where we have rented the same house for twenty years. We still see Bocce Ball Park every day from our kitchen table.

~

Even though the four of us have different intersections with our place here, we are each curious about occupations in general, and much more pressingly, how our own various occupations of this land can be transformed. East Vancouver in general, and Commercial Drive especially, has historically been an exuberant place, welcoming newcomers from all over the globe: visitors like us, others who have been forcibly brought to these lands and all kinds of people escaping untenable situations. Come to the Drive on a sunny day and you'll see a frothy mix of people mostly able to share land easily and well. And there is maybe no better place to witness it than in Bocce Ball Park, where everyday activities give us clues as to how we can share land in a decolonial sense.

Because of, and despite, all the volatile political and emotional responses parks elicit, we, like most everyone else, have a lot of love for parks. And maybe more than anywhere, we love the little park beside our house. We think that a close examination of this one small patch of grass might produce some generative conversations about land (parks and otherwise) and, more than that, force us to confront our confused and confusing attitudes toward occupation. We're after a renovated politics of land, in the context of our ongoing occupation. This project speaks directly and frankly to settlers[2] like us: how can we disavow the colonial attitudes that stain all our thinking about land? And how can we simultaneously embrace the good, durable and ineffable communities that have formed on these lands?

We have lived in East Vancouver for twenty-seven years now, and we still have a lot of love for this neighbourhood, even as it is buffeted by gentrifications. We have raised a family and grown up here. We feel like we have a certain connection, a fidelity to this place — but our residency is precarious. We're renters, for one, so our tenure is always tenuous. And our love for Commercial Drive is being tested perilously. Frankly, this is a very different place than we signed up for. The neighbourhood has become less diverse, the housing wildly more expensive, the streets a little more generic, the pretentiousness more toxic, the displacements endemic. We presume that our tenure here will not last much longer. We have fought off one renoviction already; the next time we will surely look elsewhere.

But in an even deeper and more critical sense, we are precarious because our presence is predicated on colonial land theft, on illegitimate grounds. We're uninvited visitors on stolen Indigenous territory. And, honestly, we're not really sure what to do about that. We know that almost everything has to change about how we encounter land and that our ways of living need to change — but we are unclear about what that means exactly. This book project is a small reckoning with these truths, an attempt to take on these realities in a local and personal way, by looking closely at the land right here — one small piece of land we see and smell and hear every day.

Victoria Park is just an average, small-ish city park, one you'd easily miss on any map of the area. Few people notice or pay much attention to it unless they live nearby. In a lot of other ways, though, there is so much to talk about in Bocce Ball Park. That one square block articulates so many of the aporias of occupied urban land. So that's what this book is: a close portrait of Bocce Ball Park as a narrative thread and case study, as a route to talking about the occupation of land and especially parks. In talking about Bocce Ball Park, we are trying to think about parks broadly, through specific histories of settlement and treaty, and theorizing about land in all its pluralities.

Perhaps the only remarkable part of Bocce Ball Park is the intense density and diversity of uses: grizzled bocce ball players shouting and gambling, hipsters doing hipster things, dog-walkers, kids of all ages, a Latinx harm-reduction group, parents and caregivers, readers, drinkers,

Victoria Park, day 32. Photo by Daisy Couture

drug users, guitar players, soccer players, youth camps, meetings and people sleeping in the sun and overnight. In most ways though, it is a totally unremarkable park. It's easy to miss, easy to ignore — it's indistinguishable, really, from scores of others just like it in the city. It is just a patch of grass with a gravel path arcing through one side and a fringe of trees lining each edge. There is a playground, a bathroom and two bocce ball runs. Some benches, a water fountain and an arbour-kind-of-thing near the bocce runs. A few modest historical photos are implanted into small boulders along the path. It's just a humble urban park that looks and acts a lot like run-of-the-mill parks in every city.

All parks, and this one in particular, are sites where the exercise of sovereignty — who has authority over specifically defined territories — is unclear and unsteady. People assume that parks are public so they should be allowed to do their thing there, but those things inevitably collide with other people's things. And park regulations. And neighbours. And laws and bylaws. And righteous indignation about what parks *are for*. One of the great virtues of many parks is that, despite all the pretences

(and occasional violence) of regulation, they often act as safe zones where people can get away with things they never would be able to, say, on sidewalks or in a library. Parks often emerge as petri dishes for urban experimentation, and Bocce Ball Park is a lively and fecund example. At almost any time of the day or night, someone is pushing against some limits: pitching a tent for overnight camping, slacklining, jumping off the swings for the first time, hosting a party, getting high, laying down a 200 foot slippery slide, hitting a golf ball, drinking, practising tai chi, letting their dog run wild, or making sure everyone knows they are the baddest dude there. And that's almost precisely why we love that park.

But parks are not abstract spatial creations; they are always complicit in and with power. Parks are almost always key players in displacements, and Bocce Ball Park is no different: its energy and audacity are a clear drawing card for realtors and incoming capital, who love to tout the edginess and "urban grit" of our neighbourhood. In cities across the world, but in Vancouver especially, property values and gentrification are numbingly constant topics of discussion, narratives that simultaneously obscure and highlight Indigenous dislocations on the same territory. Older narratives of displacement and dispossession are carried into the twenty-first century with new kinds of claims to property, and those with the most money get to choose where to live while those without are relegated to picking through the leftovers. Bocce Ball Park, like every park, is not exempt from responsibility. Hardly a week goes by without one more jackass realtor unashamedly leaving a vampiric letter in our mailbox hoping to buy this house, always noting that our proximity to Victoria Park is a major draw for eager "pre-approved buyers." The park has to account for its role in the slow destruction of this neighbourhood, just as we all have to account for our roles in settler-colonial dominations.

In all its complicities, duplicities and fraughtness, Bocce Ball Park is also *our* park. We love it and know it intimately, and we like to imagine that it knows and loves us back. The kids have grown up playing on the playgrounds; we traverse it nearly daily and constantly observe it directly and indirectly. We throw baseballs, walk dogs, check on passed-out people, comfort babies, use the toilet in emergencies, smell the pot smokers, and listen to fights and music and old guys yelling at each other in Italian. We've hosted huge potlucks with scores of neighbours,

attended meetings and rallies, watched movies, held festivals, attended performances and avoided all kinds of people and events there.

It sometimes gets a little hairy. In the early days it was commonly known as "Man-Down Park" because it is close to the liquor store and there was a consistent tempo of first-responders and ambulances attending to people. No small number of police incidents have occurred over the years, some pretty alarming. There are a lot of folks drifting around at any time of night or day, and the drinking and drug use have always been matters of local contention. Debates about the park's safety are ongoing, especially as it relates to women, especially at night. But despite, or actually because of it all, we overwhelmingly think of Bocce Ball Park as an exemplar of both commonality and difference. Come visit almost any time of day or year and you will see all kinds of people doing all kinds of things in close proximity with remarkably little friction. Like every park, it contains so many stories, so much history, so many relationships; for many people it is among the primary places to experience the city. We want to tell part of the park's story here, to interrogate it as a place, as particular kind of urban subjectivity. But more than that, we want to use it as a vehicle for thinking about occupations, the uses of urban parks, the quasi-spiritual claims for the natural world and the history of this city.

Most importantly, this book is trying to think through relationships with land. We're a white, settler family on Indigenous territory. That reality seeps into every political question, staining all of our legacies. Colonialism both gives settlers permissions and forecloses on us, all in the same breath. Our heritage forces us to confront our genocidal lineages and to ask how we can live on this land with some dignity and respect. It asks how we can eschew simple narratives of reconciliation and contribute to restitution. The urban question is always a question of land, and this land where we live was straight stolen. Now it is occupied — by settlers like us but also by all kinds of other people and other-than-humans who have arrived via every imaginable route and from every corner of the globe.

The book is composed of multiple elements, each informing and entwining with one another, an overlapping assemblage that mimics the dense pluralities of the park. Each element was developed semi-autonomously, with significant formal and informal contributions from all of us, and each element implicitly and explicitly references the others.

Victoria Park, day 88. Photo by Daisy Couture

Daisy documented the park with one photo every day from the exact same spot (the southwest corner) for a year, as well as many other photos. A selection of her photos is distributed throughout the book and serves to both illuminate the space of the park and ground our work in seasonality, everyday-ness and familiarity. The full set of 365 colour images is available online via the Fernwood website (https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/resources/on-this-patch-of-grass). Sadie interviewed a whole range of people who use and think about the park: dog people, kids, drinkers, parents, bocce players, neighbours and more, asking after their ideas, memories, contentions and feelings about the park. These interviews were recorded in text, audio and photographs and are discussed by Sadie, more of which are also available on the website.

Selena wrote an historical and archival examination of the property title to the land on which the park was constructed. She considers how the place that became the park represents and articulates the assumptions of property ownership by settlers in relation to Indigenous peoples'

continuing refusal of such colonial constructions. Matt wrote an essay exploring the idea of nature in the city, how ecological discourses around urban parks are mobilized, how they are positioned in urban planning conversations and how parks might contribute to decolonial horizons.

In addition, we asked three people who we admire tremendously and whose work has significantly influenced us in various ways to contribute to the book. All three are friends and interlocutors, as well as critically influential thinkers but from very different backgrounds than us and each other. Denise Ferreira da Silva is a professor and director of the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice at the University of British Columbia. Erick Villagomez is a designer, architect, landscape architect, writer, painter and illustrator who teaches at several universities. Glen Coulthard is a member of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation and an associate professor in the First Nations and Indigenous Studies Program and the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia. We are grateful and honoured to have all three contribute their thoughts to the book.

Each of these pieces stands alone, and together they represent one interrogation of a small urban park. We hope that this story of Bocce Ball Park will be a fruitful way to think about the roles of parks in the lives of cities, the histories saturating the everyday land all around us and how this knowledge can guide more respectful and responsible relationships in sharing the land.

2

A BETTER LANDSCAPE

"*Go home* son. We don't want you here. Go back to wherever you are from. This is *our* land, not *yours*. This is *Indian* land. This land is not for white people."

She wasn't being awful but, holy cow, was she ever *direct*. And she was standing right in my way, not letting me pass. I had no idea what to do, so I just stood there and listened as she repeated herself. I tried to interject some quasi-sympathetic comments but realized how stupid I sounded, so I pulled up and just listened. It was a beautiful, summery Saturday morning and I had been crossing the park, wandering through the sunshine, my thoughts drifting easily. There were a bunch of people, mostly older and Indigenous, sitting on a bench just off the path, and I guess she had been in the process of leaving and just ended up crossing my route. Or maybe not. Maybe she had seen me coming and had decided to speak her mind. Maybe she confronted every white person she could. Or maybe I was just someone who she figured needed some talking to.

I stood there for what seemed like a really long time, even though it was probably less than thirty seconds. But it was long enough that someone else, an Indigenous guy I know from around the neighbourhood (at least enough to say hello to) got up off the bench and barked at her to leave me alone. He said that I was okay. A few hipsters had strolled up behind me on the path; there were small clumps of parents in the playground with their kids and a few other people sitting around. Everyone was giving the situation a wide berth, pretending it wasn't happening. It was definitely a little weird and uncomfortable: an older Indigenous woman confronting a much younger white dude in public with overt hostility and intent. I stood there rooted to the spot, stunned. The other guy grabbed her arm

and steered her around me. As we passed she deliberately bumped my shoulder and stared right at me. It felt like she was just short of spitting at me. I took a deep breath and kept walking, entirely unsure how to feel. I turned her argument over and over in my head for the rest of the day. What should I have said? The right answer: I should have said nothing, just listened. She was correct: my family and I live on the unceded, traditional and occupied territories of the Musqueam (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm), Squamish (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh) and Tsleil-Waututh (səlilw̓ətaʔɬ) nations. And when I say "occupied," I mean by people like me. By me. She was right — it *is* her land by any measure, ethical or legal.

My kids and I were born here on the west coast of Canada. We've lived in East Vancouver for twenty-five years — that's their whole life. We are *from here,* aren't we? I'm the fourth generation of my family to settle here on Coast Salish land. My heritage is a common kind of waspy mongrel: English, Irish, French, Scottish, probably more. Honestly though, I have no clue how much of any of those things I am, or what kind of heritage I could claim. I have very little connection to or interest in any of those lineages and have never done any kind of family-tree investigations into my ancestry. Really, the only things I know about my forebears are stories my grandmother and parents told me. Stories that I may or may not have straight. It's just never really been of much interest to me.

I am certainly white though: a pasty, blotchy Northern/Western European kind of white. Selena has a similarly hybrid kind of background, much more French (from her dad's side) to my British, and her mom was Scottish/Irish from Prince Edward Island; thus our kids, like us, are just another bunch of mongrels. But we are all unmistakably and unequivocally visible as white, and maybe more accurately, not *from here*, really. There is no way to understand our place here as anything other than colonial. So, maybe we *should* be getting out of here. But that sounds weird to my ears. I think it's better to ask: how can we make sense of the woman's — correct — claim that this is her territory, that this land was stolen?

Thinking through the woman's comments to me — and taking them seriously — seems like one fruitful route to consider decolonization, not in the abstract, not as metaphor, but in the everyday, grounded, landed sense. I agree with her when she says this is her land, not mine. I take

Victoria Park, day 48. Photo by Daisy Couture

that generally, but also specifically (i.e., the park) — but I'm unsure what that might mean next.

These questions cannot and should not be framed as questions of white fragility, anxiety or guilt. That kind of white hand-wringing is profoundly unhelpful and has to be marginalized. Parsing my emotional contours on this point is of little interest to me, let alone anyone else. I do want to ask after the occupation of parks, though, as a route to a renovated politics of land. Parklands are often positioned as apolitical, as "common" or public land that somehow eludes examination amidst the grit of property markets and land-use battles, but it is critical to understand parks as a central feature of colonial land logics, as aggressively regulating and disciplining land and its occupations. Quandamooka Nation scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes:

> It takes a great deal of work to maintain Canada, the United States, Hawai'i, New Zealand and Australia as white possessions. The regulatory mechanisms of these nation-states are extremely

> busy reaffirming and reproducing this possessiveness through a process of perpetual Indigenous dispossession, ranging from the refusal of Indigenous sovereignty to overregulated piecemeal concessions. (2015: xi)

It takes a great deal of work to maintain parks as buttresses of colonial occupation. To interrogate the "park idea," it is necessary to understand how parks have been deployed historically and how they have emerged today. We have to know how Bocce Ball Park came to be and ask what it, and all parks, *want*. We have to ask about its occupations, who has made decisions there, who controls it, who calls it *theirs*. That little park, like all other parks, is not just a random patch of grass. It is being built and rebuilt, bit by bit, day by day, and like all the rest of us, it has to be subjected to a decolonizing gaze. Parks cannot feign innocence, and Bocce Ball Park is not exempt.

~

That incident with the woman is not the only confrontation I've had in Bocce Ball Park. Actually, that sounds rougher than I mean — I've never had any kind of physically damaging encounter; I've never been jacked or mugged or assaulted. But that doesn't mean it's a delicate place. It's a pretty messy, vibrant and funky spot, and everyone around the park has had to face up to certain kinds of difference and certain kinds of uncomfortableness.

The one rough spot I've ever been in happened in the late 1990s. I was traversing the park diagonally, coming home from the bar on a Friday night. Not late at all, maybe ten-thirty or so. At the far corner there were four or five crusty punk kids who for the past couple of weeks had been camping under the kids' play equipment. But this time they were acting strangely: flailing their arms, swearing and reeling around erratically. I stopped and asked what was up, noticing quickly that at least a couple of them had blood streaming' from their face and head. Another guy was sitting at the bottom of the yellow plastic slide, rocking slowly with his head in his hands and moaning loudly. A young woman was crying and talking profanely about vengeance. They said they had been "overpowered."

I had no idea what they were talking about. There was no one else around and the park was dead quiet. I asked what kind of help I could provide, maybe a drive to the hospital? They declined exuberantly and dismissed me. I paused and thought about it for a moment, waited, then carried on my way, not sure what else to do. It was very dark and I was almost in the exact middle of park when I figured out what had happened. I obviously wasn't very alert, because before I knew what was going on, I found myself surrounded by a circle of seven or eight young men. I didn't know where they had come from or how in the hell I didn't notice them: I was walking across a small field and there was nowhere for them to hide. But it was dark, and I was in my own head, and they surprised me.

I took a quick look around me and immediately realized that they were in front, behind and on all sides. The one in front of me sneered, "Why were you talking to those dudes over there? Are you with them?" I peered through the nighttime murk trying to get a sense of the guy. I answered in the negative, and asked back, "Did you do that to them? Why?" Several laughed: "That was us. We wrecked them. Cause we felt like it." Snickers. I could feel them closing in slightly. I can fight, and actually really like combat sports, but I'm no Bruce Lee and this was only going to go badly, likely extremely badly. Options flashed through my head: there seemed to be a gap between those two guys there, maybe I could bust through and make it home? My front door was only a couple hundred yards away. Maybe that gap wasn't really there though. Maybe I should get a few good shots in on this little prick in front of me? I had pretty much settled on just turtling after the first blow: going down in the dark covering my head and groin and hoping for the best.

It was getting close to showtime. I could instinctually feel it coming and figured the first shot was going to come from behind. So I turned sharply and encountered a minor revelation. It was Vlad. Bad Vlad. For years, I had been running informal basketball games at the school court just down the street. Me and my idiot buddies would gather every Saturday morning for a hung-over run of basketball, and over time, a pack of kids — teenagers and younger — would join us. It was always a good run, eventually degenerating into a huge free-for-all, but some of

the more talented kids got pretty good, and we had some skilled games. One of those kids was Bad Vlad.

I hadn't seen him for some years. He was probably thirteen or fourteen back then: a tall, quiet kid, who had some ball skills and didn't speak English all that well. He'd always been friendly and polite, but I didn't know much about him, or really about most of those kids. I worked at keeping their names straight, but didn't have connection with them beyond those Saturday mornings. I saw some of the kids occasionally around the neighbourhood and did know that a few of them had graduated into the drug trade. Most of them were minor hustlers, but once I had seen one of them (a guy that I did know well) sprinting down a busy sidewalk in a full-on panic. He had crossed the wrong gangsters and ended up spending a few nights locked naked in the trunk of a car in a mall parking lot before the cops fished him out.

I guess Vlad had tended in that direction as well, and that evening I had never been so glad to see him. Actually, rarely have I been that glad to see *anyone*. I yelped "*Hey! Vlad!* It's me. *Matt*!" It felt like the whole circle of us took a collective intake of breath and paused. Vlad and I looked at each other for a pregnant moment, and then all the tension released as he acknowledged me, grasped my outstretched hand and bro-hugged me. I held him for a half-second and as he smiled hugely, "*You're lucky it's me, huh?*" No fucking kidding. *No fucking kidding.* The circle sort of dissipated and melted away, and I continued on my way, all rubber-legged, got home and locked the door behind me.

That was it. That's really the only time I felt in danger in the park or its environs, although for years afterwards I avoided walking across the middle of it any time after dark. Some say "a conservative is a liberal who has been mugged," but that situation didn't change my views of community safety and security much, if at all. In some ways, it concretized them. I still think that parks are inherently safety-generating spaces: the more people who are in public, the more unscheduled interactions we have with our neighbours, the more we see each other, the safer we all are. This is classic urban theory, Jacobsian "eyes on the street," a shared visibility that securitizes seamlessly, the antipode to all of us cowering behind locked doors, video cameras, guards, alarmed security systems, Fox News and burgeoning paranoia. Parks, in their very construction, support collective safety.

Victoria Park, day 103. Photo by Daisy Couture

But that's not always right. For many, parks represent lurking danger, full of unpredictability. Think of the Central Park rapist, the Stanley Park "Babes in the Wood" killings, all the stories you have heard of sexual assaults or muggings in parks, all the times you have heard of the bodies of murder victims being found in parks. Or all the tiresomely pedestrian, smaller acts of harassment or irritation or violation you have heard of or encountered. I always hope Selena, the kids and really everyone, think twice about crossing Bocce Ball Park, or most any park, at night. Parks, like every urban space, are socially manufactured and we all experience them differently. For some of us, parks are mostly to be avoided and are patently dangerous spots.

Bocce Ball Park isn't that kind of place, I don't think. I'm afraid I am giving a wrong impression by telling these two stories up front. It's a peaceable spot. It's kind of amazing actually. There are all kinds of people who use the park in all kinds of ways. There is a fantastic density and diversity of users, and we all get along almost all of the time. There

are bocce ball players and card-playing gamblers, street types, plenty of drinking and drugging, middle-class kids and families, hipsters, dog people and dogs, punks, homeless people, rowdy teenagers, nerds reading books, sunbathers and tons else. And without much overt regulation or monitoring, it all works out beautifully, almost all the time.

At least that was what I was arguing at a community meeting a few years back. Actually, it wasn't a "community" meeting at all — it was a gathering of local homeowners who were claiming they were "concerned" about the park and wanted to do "something" about it. What they really meant was they wanted the park "cleaned up" of the rabble. It was an unadorned class maneuver. You know these types: there are renditions of these working in every neighbourhood in every city everywhere. They claim "their" park is being overrun by homeless people, addicts, whoever — and call for more police interventions, security cameras and so on. In this case, they were making a big push for the city to install weird blue lights throughout the park that supposedly make it impossible for intravenous drug-users to find their veins.

I was not invited to this meeting. I am a renter and my political positions are well-known. I am not welcome among these people, but a sympathetic neighbour let me know about the (small) event so I invited myself. It was supposed to be a meeting of concerned neighbours to talk about issues regarding the park and I seemed to qualify (and figured there might be expensive snacks) so I went. I listened semi-patiently as one person after the other complained about the Indigenous kids and the older Latinx guys who gather there to drink daily, about the homeless and punk rock campers, about the garbage and noise. When it was my turn, I was fuming and gave a righteously energetic speech extolling the virtues of the park, of all the difference it contained, of how proud I was of how many people the park welcomed.

A smaller, older Asian woman waited until I finished. She looked right at me and quietly said: "You don't mind crossing the park because those men don't yell awful things at you." I paused and took a breath, agreed with her and, chastened, sat down. And of course she was right. I'm a healthy, middle-aged, white dude who goes to the gym. I rarely feel physically threatened in the park. When I got home I asked the women in my house if that was their experience too. "Do those guys yell shit at