

Podcast final edit - transcript

Ben: Hi, welcome to Loops the podcast brought to you by Caraboo projects. We're an Arts Collective based in Bristol and each episode we collaborate with a guest artist, cultivating conversations around social histories, folklore, visual arts, music and everything else that falls between the cracks. My name is Ben GJ Thomas. I spend my time teaching, writing, listening and working on collaborative projects across the city of Bristol, often exploring what it means to live in a time of environmental trouble.

I woke up this morning to find the city still, little movement & indistinct weather. After frittering away most of the morning, I disentangled myself from the contours of my flat and headed outside. I drove south, through the housing estate and past the edge of the city, where the buildings begin to dissolve, replaced by a uniform rhythm of wheats field that run alongside the road, down towards the coast. Beyond lies the severn estuary, a polyphonic expanse of water that pushes the horizon backwards, creating space to be filled today by a tetris-game of container ships, awaiting their turn to dock at the nearby port of Avonmouth.

A couple of months ago, I came across a notice board likely put up by the council during a more utopian time of public education. There were big italic letters and a drawing of an eel, with what can only be described as a grin. The board explained how eels start their life in the Sargasso Sea, just north of Bermuda. They travel along the gulf stream, up the coast of North America then out across the Atlantic. As such, eel populate river systems on both sides of the ocean. Some are labelled 'American eels', some 'European', yet they begin life together in the Sargasso. Here in the River Severn, young eels, often called glass eels or elvers, arrive on a high tide in late spring. They choose to call this river home for many decades before returning across the ocean once more, to reproduce and ultimately die.

Whilst eels are often imagined as slippery, since hearing this story I've found the creature to be nothing but sticky. I can't shake this tale of eel criss-crossing the Atlantic, out of sight below the surface yet on occasion close enough to be felt. Whenever I've had the opportunity, I found myself returning to the estuary banks, looking out over the muted surface of the water and imagining the many worlds that might lie beneath.

I'm here today. Just to my right I can see Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station. It is composed of a series of low-slung rectangles that make little impression on the surrounding skyline. Any sense of the sublime is buried so deep inside that one is minded to pay little attention. Pipes extend out into the turbulent waters, through which water is drawn to cool the nuclear reactors. Eel often become unwitting passengers carried through these pipes and pressed against filters, before if luck will have it being deposited back into the muddy waters that surround the station. The effects of this detour, including the rates of mortality, remain unclear. Gaining a clear picture of what occurs in a body of water this large and murky is never without challenge or contention.

What is known however is that real numbers across the world have been plummeting since the 1970s. There is no singular threat. They suffer from loss of habitat, blocked waterways, environmental pollution and overfishing. In addition, as the seas warm the Gulf Stream itself, relied upon by eels for their migration, is beginning to weaken. For these creatures to flourish once more, it is increasingly apparent that an altogether different world is needed.

Standing here today looking out, I feel sad. I feel really sad. And yet this sadness is complicated by the very human acts of violence that set sail from these shores. The Severn will forever hold the memory of the transatlantic slave trade in its waters. In addition, the river also marks the site from which John Cabot set sail in 1497 Landing in Mi'kma'ki the territory of the Mi'kmaq people, on the east coast of what is commonly known today as Canada. Cabot's Journey laid down a marker that led to the colonisation of indigenous lands along with the violent destruction of indigenous ways of living and being. Whilst the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade is kept alive in Bristol today, this other history remains largely unspoken.

Storytelling can be powerful, though. Can we tell stories that unravel these complex threads of violence, speaking and listening with care; being mindful to never assimilate, remaining with the trouble wherever it leads us. And can eels help us in this endeavour? These creatures have played a crucial role in shaping lives across both shores of the Atlantic. How might thinking with eels enable us to recognise the past, as well as the ongoing violence of the present, whilst taking tentative steps towards imagining a future otherwise?

This is the question I'm setting out to ask.

John: So my name is John Wyatt Greenlee, I am a medieval historian. I just completed my doctoral degree at Cornell University where I wrote my my doctoral dissertation on eels in English History; over a really long span of time from the 8th Century up through through the 17th century, really. And I got to eels quite accidentally, actually. By training I'm a cartographic and map historian and I found eels on maps; eel ships actually on maps of London; and wondered what they were doing there, and the process of trying to figure out an answer to that question led me down a series of rather long rabbit holes that wound up with me trying to piece together a cultural history of eels in England.

Michael: So, my name is Michael Malay and I am a lecturer in the English department at the University of Bristol, and I first came across eels in a pub. I overheard someone talking about their incredible life cycle and not long after I was hooked so to speak. And since then, I think that was about five six years ago, I've been thinking about eels, looking out for eels, writing about eels. They have very much been on the brain. [00:06:30]

John: In early medieval England, there's not a lot of hard currency, there's not a lot of coins circulating around, and those that are tend to stay amongst the nobility and people with a lot of money, anyway. They're trading the back-and-forth mostly as a status symbol. So if you're a landlord and you're collecting rent from your tenants, most of the time you're collecting it in in-kind rent. So in grain, or ale, or honey, or eggs, or eels. And Eels are among the most

common in kind rent in early medieval England. And not just the most common in terms of number of rents, but also some of the biggest numbers; there are hundreds of thousands of eels moving around England in rent every year. You know, at the end of the 11th century, there's more than half a million. Partly it has to do with the fact that there's not a lot of hard currency and so they're taking in-kind rent. Part of it has to do with the fact that eels are a really good food to eat during lent or other religious holidays where you're not supposed to eat meat. Medieval understanding of eel biology was that they were asexual, that they had a kind of spontaneous generation. And so that made them really good for times like lent where you weren't supposed to be thinking about worldly desires or sex, and that's part of why you don't eat the meat of cows, pigs, goats or anything else; because flesh meat is supposed to make you think of carnal desires. There are both fiscal reasons why eels make for good rent, but also theological reasons.

There are a bunch of places, especially in early medieval English writing, where you can see very explicitly writers using eels as a metaphor. I think one of the best examples of this is late, it's one of the last ones too, a guy called Thomas Bradwardine who was very briefly the archbishop of Canterbury and he died in the black death in 1348, and a little before he died he wrote a handbook of memory, a guide for how to train your mind using typical medieval mnemonic practices where you memorise a word by thinking about other words that remind you of it. And towards the end of the book he gives you a full sentence having walked you through all the different stages. The sentence is about the English king laying siege to the city of Berwick in Scotland. And he says, 'okay to remember this word, remember all of these possible things', and he gives you a lot of different examples because for mnemonic memory to work it has to work with what's in your head. So, for the word king in the sentence, he says you could think about the king, picture the king, or if you know a guy named king that would work. He does this for all the words in the sentence except for England. When he gets to England he says, when you want to remember England think of an eel. And it's the only mnemonic example he gives. And so, it's a really interesting space where he's using the eel to talk about almost national identity. He's using the fish to think about the people and the place in a very explicit way.

Michael: They're slippery. They're also very tough, they're tenacious creatures. I came across a book written in the mid eighteenth century and it had a wonderful way of describing eels as being 'tenacious of life'. So they are slippery, they slip through our concepts and our ways of thinking about the world. At the same time they're tough, and hardy, and canny in all sorts of ways.

Thom: My name is Tom Van Doren and I'm an associate professor at the university of Sydney and also at the university of Oslo. I think of myself these days as a field philosopher and storyteller. The idea of field philosophy emerges out of trying to take the questions and the approaches of the discipline of philosophy into the field to talk to people, something that philosophers don't always do but probably should; and to experience and immerse ourselves in the actual landscapes, the actual lives that we are writing about. To quote or to riff off Isabel Stengers, to do our philosophy in the presence of those whose for whom it matters. [00:09:11]

Michael: So this creature of change and slipperiness and metamorphoses, is also a creature that's attached to place. And they do this wonderful elegant thing of reconciling what we normally think of as opposites, so flow on one hand, attachment on the other, promiscuity and rootedness, open borders and love of home. So, you know when we're talking about what eels allow us to think, I think they allow us to transcend categories that we often get stuck in where we say, you're either this or that. Eels are always asking you to have both, and.

Rebecca: Hi, my name is Rebecca Thomas. I am from Halifax, Nova Scotia. I am l'nu of the Mi'kmaq nation. My dad calls me swift fox. I am a poet. I am an activist, and I'm a bit of a policy brain as well having done my graduate work in Settler Colonial-Indigenous relationships.

Canada has also really done a very poor job of educating the Canadian public about the atrocities of colonisation and the decimation of indigenous communities here. It's only probably been within the last ten to fifteen years that you've seen any sort of discussion about this. You know you have the colonisation of Canada happening, there's movement into the west, we have our first prime minister, John A. McDonald, who along with Duncan Campbell Scott, were the architects of the residential school system. And so what this was, was that it was law for about 150 years that indigenous children were taken into these industrial schools where they were christianised, punished for speaking their language, there was a lot of experiments that were done on indigenous children, such as nutritional experiments. This was accompanied by the founding of the North West Mounted Police, now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). One of their original mandates was to enforce the residential schooling system. You would have Indian agents and the RCMP who would come into communities and take the children away from their parents and place them into these schools. A lot of folks think that, 'oh this must have happened a really long time ago', but the last residential school in Canada closed in 1996. My father went to one of these residential schools, from the age of 5 to 10, and he went in speaking only mi'kmaq and left speaking only english. And within these schools there was a lot of violence, there was mental abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, these schools were horrible institutions. And they were mandatory. it is estimated 150,000 indigenous kids went through these schools and roughly around 8000 of these children died. At the time children had a higher death rate of going to residential schools than soldiers who went to WWII. To kill the Indian in the child, that was the mantra of these schools. And so, there was about 90 of them in operation at its peak across Canada. And so you have these indigenous people now, through generations and generations of going through these schools and now we're trying to operate and act as cultural experts, but we're still dealing with a lot of these intergenerational trauma pieces. Things like addiction, reclaiming language, and a lot of lost language. A lot of our languages are in danger of going extinct. So things like understanding culture and bringing it back to your question around the eel, language is such a huge part of our worldview that when we're trying to look at these cultural pieces, we need to do so through our languages. But you have generations of people who no longer speak it, me being one of them, i'm learning it but it's very difficult. So this is the stage in Indigenous-Canada relations right now and it was only when i was in university that i even hear about residential schools, that's how effective they were at

keeping this as a secret. My father went to one and i didn't know until i was in my 20's. You have a lot of indigenous people who are trying to relearn our stories.

For so long we have been being force-fed one particular story of success and there hasn't been a meaningful exchange. There hasn't been a relationship built on reciprocity, which is what our treaties, at least from our side of understanding, were meant to be. Rita Jo, who is a famous Mi'kmaq poet, has this poem called 'I lost my talk' and at the very end she says, 'I gently offer my hand so I can find my talk and teach you about me'. And I think that that we need to have people have that softness, and to understand and to let us now speak because we haven't been able to exchange stories. It has been taking and taking and taking and taking, or being told that this is the way it is, and shut up, my way or the highway. And so now I think it just comes to listening with earnesty instead of listening and waiting for your turn to speak.

Thom: I guess storytelling is I think particularly important because it's a mode of engagement with the world that is, as many people have written about, it's memorable, relatable, it's a kind of way of conveying information that is compelling to our hominid brains for some reason. And that in itself I think is powerful and important. But the thing that really appeals to me about storytelling is its capacity to hold together complexity. That there isn't a need for stories to be resolved, that they can be multi-voiced. They can try to weave together; I think good stories anyway; to weave together complexity and difference, and to hold it in tension without necessarily having to resolve it. And at the same time do that in a way pulls that complexity into encounter with an audience however they experience that story. And through that encounter transforms them, makes them responsible in new ways. I think we can't obviously, it's very difficult to unlearn what we what we learn and so to come to know about the disappearance or the decline of eels or any of the numerous other species that are disappearing around the world today is to be pulled into an encounter that and there are accountabilities that come with that encounter and so storytelling I think is part of how we stage those encounters. [00:13:08]

Michael: I think eels are very good at confounding our orthodox or conventional ideas of how the world was put together. As you know, they undertake these extraordinary migrations from the Sargasso Sea in the Northwest Atlantic Ocean, and they come all the way from the Sargasso to the rivers of Europe and North Africa. It's a journey at minimum of 3,000 miles. And when eels undertake that journey, they are no bigger than a grain of rice. So it's an astonishing thought 3,000 miles of open ocean with all the extreme weather you might have in the Atlantic and the tremendous waves and various predators and the swirling currents, for this grain of rice to make it all the way from the Sargasso to Europe and North Africa is a pretty miraculous feat. In undertaking that Journey they also cross all sorts of political and geographical boundaries. They cross time zones. They cross National fishing territories. They cross all sorts of lines that nations and governments have drawn and incised across the world. They don't need a passport to come to the places that humans need passports for. And that's interesting to me because it suggests that there might be other ways of organising how we think the world is connected, or to put this another way eels ask a question of us. And I think the question they ask is how might we reimagine boundaries and borders so that they are nested within larger ecological systems. So that our borders become bioregional rather than politicised. I think that's something that I'm

fascinated by. Eels slip through concepts but they also slip through borders and the lines we've drawn across the world. And so they provoke a question; how might we reimagine lines of connection.

Rebecca: Two-eyed seeing, or Etuaptmumk, the Mi'kmaq word for it, is the gift of multiple perspectives or two-eyed seeing. So the idea that you see the way the world exists in these multifaceted viewpoints and realities, all at the same time. I guess maybe the best equivalent to it in a social science context would be intersectionality, right? This is Mi'kmaq territory and it is at the same time, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island. It's these multiple things and how they exist. If we're going to find a way where we can move forward together, which is very much my belief, I can't say to all the non-indigenous people GTFO, go back to wherever you came from, understanding that there are generations and generations of people here who were born here and that this is their home. Sharing is a really important process, but, and we might have entered into those agreements through peace and friendship treaties but that's not what's been upheld. This idea of Etuaptmumk is that if we can kind of come through and take the best of all of these worlds to then move forward in a way that allows for equal representation, then I think we would have much more equitable country and society. And so that's the challenge, because everybody wants to think that their worldview is best.

Thom: Stories helped to shape worlds. They're not mirrors held up to reality. They are processes of storying, of worlding, that however significantly or insignificantly intervene in our understanding and help to make the world otherwise. So for me the work of storytelling is central to how I take up this work of hopeful mourning, or mournful hope if you like. I think there are multiple diverse ways in which in which that can be done. [00:19:36]

John: Eels are by volume and by price the most smuggled animal on earth. The eel trade from Europe to Asia, Interpol recently called it Europe's ivory trade. It's about a three billion dollar a year black market industry. It's about a quarter of the elvers coming into Europe every year are smuggled to Asia. Glass eels are smuggled Asia in suitcases, basically. And then they're grown there and then they're shipped all over the world. Even though ones that are shipped that are not smuggled, that are shipped legally, paying attention to the trail that an eel takes to get from where it's caught to your plate is a fascinating journey. So, in the United States, there's a lot of fishing in Maine and most of those eels get sold in China. So if you catch a glass eel in Maine, it then gets sort of shipped down to New York City and put on a plane and taken to China, where it's going for a couple of years in a pond. Then it's shipped to Japan as a full-size eel where it's butchered and may be sent back to the New York where it's sold and then carted up to where I live in upstate New York. So, if I go to a Japanese restaurant here and I eat an eel, the odds are its had this real ridiculous journey that has a huge carbon footprint. I think paying attention to that is one of those places where eels can be instructive to us and to how to rethink the way that we're living in the world right. That the sort of systems we've built to do what we want to do, right, to eat eels when and where and how we want are broadly destructive. It's not just to the eels, but to all kinds of other animals and to the climate.

Michael: As part of my research into eels, I've been spending a lot of time at Severn beach. I would go to Severn beach initially just to see what the birds were doing, to see what the light was doing, to go for a walk and just to stretch my legs. And over time I realised that I would go to Severn beach and not really think about the fact that I was going through Avonmouth first. When I looked out at the wonderful Estuary at Severn beach, I looked for the Steephelm, you know islands in the middle of the Estuary. Or I looked at what the tides were doing and I wasn't looking at the cargo ships that were coming in and out of Avonmouth and that got me thinking about; okay, what's going on in this Estuary? It's a place where eels arrive in April in their millions as they're sort of funnelled up the Severn estuary and as they ride the tides up that river. At the same time, it's a place where jet fuel is coming from the Middle East on these massive cargo ships. And where cars made in Japan are being unloaded to be placed in these huge car parks by Avonmouth. It's also a place where migrant workers are being paid a pittance to work in distribution centres and factories. So you've got your Amazon fulfilment centre there and your Tesco distribution centres. So I started thinking about, what is this estuary? And it was a very complex question. What is this Estuary? It's a place where the eels are making us rethink the map of the world. It's also a place of globalisation and late capitalism, and the cargo ships are in a sense going over old slavery routes as well, as they come from all over the world. So there's a lot there's a lot going on there. So that image of the translucent eels next to the shining jet fuel from the Middle East, those both belong to the same place and yet they're doing very different things aren't they. One of the images is about continuity and process and the eels instinctive journey from the Sargasso to Europe, and the jet fuel is wrapped up in all these questions of capital and the reconfiguration of the world by multinational companies and by modernity, by processes that we feel we can't control but that control us.

There's an interesting website where you can look at the various ships that come into different ports around the world and there's one for Avonmouth as well. And sometimes I'm just interested because I go to Severn beach and I'll look at what birds are there, you know, there will be interesting migrants that have come from Scandinavia, or special geese that birders get really revved up about, but then I look at this website and see; oh, there's been I don't know a cargo ship from India carrying cars, or a cargo ship from Cyprus carrying who knows what? And I guess after I made these connections I was thinking about who has the privilege to go birding at Severn beach? I go there with my binoculars and I geek out on the birds that I can see there, but I go for leisure and I noticed that there are people who go to Avonmouth and it's not for leisure, it's for work. Many of them are migrants and a lot of them don't speak English and I realised they are having very different experiences of this Estuary. It's true that I sometimes feel like maybe a bit of an exception as someone from an ethnic minority group myself, who is also looking at, I don't know the redshank with my binoculars, and sometimes I feel out of place in what is a very white kind of space. At the same time I realise I have a ticket to Severn Beach that my fellow passengers who are working for minimum wage don't have. We're on the same train, but we're bound for different places.

Rebecca: Never is indigenous ways of knowing and being as a theory of society ever looked at with the possibility of saying, you know what, I think it would be really great if actually everybody just did this, because it's better whether it be for the environment, whether it be for learning

styles, whether it be through community supports, that sort of stuff. It's like, you know native people can't do anything, native. Now native people do things native in secret, now we'll allow these little bubbles of indigeneity to come up within these very eurocentric notions of operating, and then I'm waiting for the next stage of like actually maybe we could organise our societies in these ways according to these indigenous theories? Because these are good theories. That's what people don't get like seem to look at. They say, 'oh that's good theory for you because you're indigenous'. It's like well actually if you operated it this way to like it would probably be for a benefit.

Thom: What I think really emerges out of attending to multi-species relationality, to our co-constitution is that we rethink these questions of what it is to be responsible and lots of scholars, especially feminist science and technology studies and allied fields have been thinking about that in terms of being response-able, the capacity to respond. And I think so much of how we respond to others and of our ability to respond to others ethically, to take up responsibility, emerges from the kinds of beings that we are which are the product of evolutionary heritages, of cultural inheritances of particular individual education and privilege, and all of these other things. So to attend to in my particular field of ethics, I think to attend to multi-species relationality is to completely transform this question of responsibility into one that that pays attention to how we become the kinds of beings that are able to respond and how we might change the ways in which we respond, how we might learn to respond differently. As Vinciane Despret puts it, to learn to be affected otherwise, to become otherwise responsible. And that is something that is constantly shifting and emerging differently for each of us. Attending to them becomes a core part of asking this question of what it means to be responsible and how each of us might take that up in our own particular way.

Rebecca: And so we have this term and I don't know if you've ever heard it from any of the lectures and what-not, it's called Netukulimk. So Netukulimk is the way in which we see ourselves as a part of the world when it comes to resources and survival and what-not. And the best English equivalent translation is 'I cannot take too much'. And could you imagine if the entire global economy that is rooted in capitalism switched to 'I cannot take too much'. Like all of a sudden the way in which we see the world and how we interact with it would fundamentally shift. Again that goes back to that very pragmatic way of seeing the world. Right? So this idea of taking too much is not rooted in some false sense of piety. It just doesn't make sense. So it's like well why if I am, you know carrying and having to take care of these things, and having to carry them around, why would I have six chairs? It doesn't make sense. I don't need it. I just need this one thing. Like why would I take all of these things? I do not need them. Like when I think about how toilet paper was being bought up at large at the beginning of Covid-19, and it's kind of like but you don't need that like that's impractical you gotta store it, you gotta make sure it doesn't get wet, you have to pay for it. You're taking too much. So imagine like you cannot take too much like it just fundamentally changes the way in which you interact. And so instead of allowing; 'well will allow indigenous people to operate with Netukulimk, but we won't look at any of the rest of the way we operate with Netukulimk', and then you have indigenous people being like maybe you should, like it might do the world a good service if you cannot take too much.

Thom: Well, the period we're living in at the moment is now sometimes referred to as the sixth mass extinction event. And I think that's in some ways a very helpful frame, in other ways not so much. But it's a period in which species of all kinds are disappearing on a staggering scale, what's often estimated to be a hundred to a thousand times the rate of normal background extinction that goes on as part of evolutionary processes. So it's a loss on a massive scale, but I think zooming out in that way, telling that kind of big picture story makes it a pretty unrelatable event. And so part of what I think we also need to do in thinking through how this current period matters and what's going on now is to slow down with each of those unique species. There is I think no singular extinction phenomenon, each species leaves the world and its own particular way. It's usually characterised by a particular kind of unraveling of relationships of possibilities that come to an end with each of these species. And then I think zooming in if you like even further we have to note that each of those species is itself comprised of numerous individuals. And so extinction is made up of often, not always but often, of numerous individual deaths or failures of reproduction. And so these individual lives and the struggles of the organisms, that comprise the species are also part of what is at stake and being lost at the moment. So I think there's a need to try and hold together all of those layers, or levels if you like, of loss and to think about how extinction ripples out into the world to draw in countless other beings, human and non-human. Trying to hold on to all of that unraveling, all of that remaking of the earth that's going on at the moment, in this sixth mass extinction event, is I think obviously impossible, but it's a challenge that I think we need to try to take on nonetheless and has to involve storytellers of diverse kinds; artists, cultural practitioners, scientists, local communities. To do that work of ongoing attention and care of bearing witness to this unraveling of our contemporary moment.

Rebecca: So I have two very good friends of mine. They run this programme called Reclaiming our Roots, and it's based off of like back-to-the-land notions of understanding the land that has shaped your culture. That's a really important thing to think of when you think about Mi'kmaq culture and land. We didn't name the land, we didn't shape the land, the land shaped us. They are the folks who are doing this kind of traditional back-to-the-land, understanding that traditional isn't just beaded earrings and ribbon skirts, but rather that traditional is also knowing the land and you know, what's on it and how does it sustain you. And I don't know that stuff, that's not something that I grew up with and they said, do you want to come eel spearing? And I was saying yes, I'm really interested, this sounds really wonderful. They say I think you should come and I said, okay, I'm going to do this. I'm going to put myself out of my comfort zone. They show up at my house and they have these poles with these like metal kind of spear attachments; imagine a rake that curls inward on the bottom with spikes that kind of curl up. And so they have these poles on the top of their truck. They tell me to get in and then we drive for 2 hours out to this estuary. When we get there, they take their toboggan, which is also a Mi'kmaq, or indigenous, invention. They throw on their spears and great, and we go out onto the ice. It's freezing cold and I'm wearing snow pants and a parka. The wind chill is maybe -18, and we're here for the next five or six hours, so it's like let's have some fun. And so they cut a hole in the ice, and again there is a mix of new-traditional, old-traditional - we weren't using rocks to do this, we had a chainsaw. We cut a square hole in the ice and James starts explaining; he says, so what you do is you put your spear in and you jam it into the muck and you haul it up. You can

feel like the suction of the muck kind of holding on to the rake bit and then you jam it down, and you know you as you're doing it you're rotating it a little bit each time. As you're rotating the sphere you're also starting to widen your circumference. And so the reason the spears are so long is because you're standing in front of one little tiny hole here in front of the ice, that's maybe you know, thirty centimetres by thirty centimetres, and you're like at an angle ramming the rake 15 feet away from the hole underneath the ice. And he says if you do this over and over and over and over and over again, eventually you will find an eel. And when you find that eel you better haul that spear up quick because you know an eels going to get out of it. They get really slimy as one of their defence mechanisms, they get really slippery and they kind of wiggle their way out of the rake.

So you're doing this, you're doing this, and it's very monotonous. It's very physically demanding. I was getting blisters on the insides of my hands from constantly hauling this rake up. But then all of a sudden I jammed it in there and I knew it wasn't a rock, I knew it wasn't a stick, those tricked me earlier on in the day. The whole pole kind of vibrates and you know there's something moving on the end of the rake. And you haul it up out and there entangled in the rake is this eel and it's such a cool experience. I think it's very overwhelming. I think about, my dad going to residential school and having his language stripped from him and his culture stripped from him and being punished for being born indigenous in Canada. It was being born as 'less-than', as a crime, and that still continues today. And yet here I was doing something that every major old white dude that has led Canada over the last however many hundreds of years would not have want us to be doing. And here I am doing it and I know the eel it's name is Katew and I you know, we're going to make INSERT which is like a traditional Mi'kmaq meal with the eel. It just felt like such an act of defiance, of this overwhelming sense of, and I'm going to swear and I'm sorry, but like fuck you, we are still here and look at us like. And we're laughing and we're healing and we're coming together as a community. And you know, me as like this kid who was totally fractured from a huge, huge part of who they are is now like learning to do this. It just felt so badass.

John: I appreciate those parts of the past that hold on, where we can see elements of cultural survival that go back a really long time. It's one of the things I really loved about the fact that those eel ships were on the Thames until the 1930s. But also there are still a handful of people in England who fish eels in the same way that their fathers did in their grandfathers and their great-grand fathers before them, going back, some of these families have been fishing eels going back before the Reformation, and I think that's worth holding on to. I think every time you sort of make a technological leap forward that abandons the sort of elements of your past, I think it's really worth taking a moment to think about what you're losing, because you are losing something you're losing a part of your sort of cultural past as well. And I think personally, I think those are important to hold on to.

Thom: The hope that we that we get, and maybe the hope that we need at this juncture in the transformation of the planet is one that is able to reckon with loss, as an ongoing process, and as one that has already happened and will continue to happen. One that takes responsibility and bears witness. That is hopeful that things might be different or might at least be as good as

they can possibly still be. whatever that might mean, and how that might be cashed out differently and mean different things for different beings, to the best of possible worlds. There's hope for that, that that might still be possible. I think what bearing witness and what a mournful hope does for me is to say, and this is something that Deborah Bird Rose wrote a lot about, it says that even if great change is not possible, there is still an obligation to bear witness, an obligation not to turn away but to acknowledge what has happened and our own complicity often in it. And to be there for others and to tell those stories that's the second part of bearing witness. To actually speak and to share those stories with others as a record and acknowledgement of what has been done here, what has happened here. So I think it's a strange kind of hope that I'm clinging to and outlining here and it's a sad one in many ways but that is the reality of much of the world in which we live. But I think there is an awful lot of, or at least I find great comfort in the notion that this is important work that whether or not it achieves great change the work of storytelling, of bearing witness, of doing what we can really matters. There's a beautiful quote from James Baldwin that I think captures a lot of this, and I'm going to paraphrase him badly I think, where he says, 'all is not lost, responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated.' And I think it's that emphasis on doing the work, doing what we can in taking up responsibility, it's in those relationships that I find hope, whether or not they may bring about some great change.

Rebecca: Like I mean, it's just comes down to I think, to thinking about humility. Like this notion, like to believe that week that 50 million pounds or dollars, or award that like, we can do this like we know everything will be able to stop it. But I think there's like I think everybody could do with a big dose of humility to just be like, we don't know the answers. Let's start working together, let's try things. I think we're so scared to try, especially big huge organisations, like countries and economic systems, to try something different because if it fails like the scrutiny and the I told you so's come out and it just stalls all progress. And so this I think this like willingness to be wrong and to be humbled. I think it's something that is incredibly necessary for these conversations to happen and to be willing to recognise that notion of Netukulimk. Like do you need to have a house that has you know four toilets in it? Like is that necessary? like do you need to have like a huge manicured yard? Do you need to have two or three cars? Again, that notion that it is possible for you to take too much, right and to have the humility to acknowledge that.

Ben: I'm back in Bristol thinking about the many conversations that have occurred since I began to let my thinking be led by eels.

I'm reminded of the writer Elizabeth Povinelli, who teaches that if one is to understand life in an age that is so connected; one must follow the trails, only ever remaining hereish. To understand eel, it is first necessary to understand the worlds in which it is entangled. This podcast has followed the eel across history & geography, paying attention to notions of power & often violence.

So what can be learnt? I can only speak from my own perspective, that of a white person standing here in a city that still benefits from the ongoing legacies of colonial violence. Many of

the lessons held within this podcast will come as no surprise for communities whose experiences have often been actively suppressed.

For me however; I will take away two ideas. Firstly; to build relationships otherwise, both between humans and other creatures, 'we' and by 'we' I mean those who occupy historic positions of power; must listen first, rather than speak. Secondly, it has taught me to slow down, we cannot rush to find answers without first recognising the many injustices of both past & present. Think with eels, listen first and take time to act with care.

Since we recorded this podcast, a lot has happened in Mi'kma'ki. Indigenous fishermen have found themselves under attack, whilst trying to uphold their rights. Rebecca sent us this update"

Rebecca: Currently right now you have the Sipekne'katik first nation, which is a Mi'kmaq band that have started their own moderate livelihood fishery, which is their right. In 1999 the supreme court of Canada came down with what is known as the Marshall decision, where Donald Marshall Junior who is a Mi'kmaq fisherman was caught fishing eel out of season and was arrested for that. He challenged that as a Mi'kmaq person it is his right according to the peace and friendship treaties of 1752 that he is allowed to fish, because he has an inherent right to do so, as established in those treaties. And so in 1999 the supreme court of Canada agreed, and said yes, Mi'kmaq fishermen have a right to fish for a moderate livelihood. However, they did not define what a moderate livelihood is and they didn't implement it. So even though it is legal for indigenous people to fish according to a moderate livelihood there is no clear definition of that. So in September 2020 Sipekne'katik started their moderate livelihood fishery and all hell broke loose. So you have non-indigenous fishermen who are cutting trap lines and leaving gear in the water. Mi'kmaq boats have been burned, vans have been set on fire. Then at a lobster pound, where thousands of pounds of lobster were stored, an indigenous fishermen was trapped inside by about 120 non-indigenous fishermen who were throwing rocks, who were threatening to hurt him, to burn him out, to set his car on fire. The RCMP were there but didn't do anything. Then later that lobster pound was burned to the ground the following day. And so, right now there is a court injunction that just came out this morning that said that all violence has to stop. That non-indigenous fishermen cannot interfere with Mi'kmaq lobster fishermen on the water or on the ground. But that just came down today, so we shall see where this leads. Right now, we're trying to hunt and fish according to Netukulimk, but i think that non-indigenous fishermen take too much and i think personally that they're afraid that Mi'kmaq fishermen are going to fish the way that they do. And i think that the way that they fish is inherently problematic, because they do take too much.

Ben: Thanks for listening. And if you want to find out more information about this episodes and our contributors, you can head to our website if you enjoyed this episode and would like to be notified about future episodes then subscribe on your platform.

