

*Circumventing  
Protocol and Building  
Collaborative  
Histories:*

*A Conversation on  
Freedom Tours  
with Tania Willard,  
Cheryl L'Hirondelle,  
and Camille Turner*

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*In 2017, artists Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Camille Turner collaborated to stage Freedom Tours, two performative interventions in Canadian National Parks. The work was commissioned by Partners in Art for LandMarks2017/Repères2017, a nationwide public arts project across twenty national parks, featuring seven curators and twelve artists. The occasion was the 150th anniversary of Canadian confederation, though, as the LandMarks curators made clear, "a hundred and fifty years is not a long time," if you consider that there are "marked mammoth bones [...which] suggest that the first humans inhabited Turtle Island over 28,000 years ago."*

*Freedom Tours took the form of two participatory interventions emphasizing Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Black histories in the territory: a guided boat tour at Thousand Islands National Parks and an intergenerational walking tour or procession at Rouge National Urban Park. In 2024, we met with curator Tania Willard and artists Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Camille Turner over zoom to discuss the frictions and the sparks that arose from this project. What follows is a distilled version of that conversation.*

### CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE

Tania, I'm curious to know why you took on this curatorial role at such a contentious time, coming from your ideological and personal standpoint?

### TANIA WILLARD

Participating was a chance to have this large-scale project, to commission artists in outdoor spaces. This established relationship through which to work with the parks was also really interesting to me. I had been thinking about outdoor spaces, Indigenous territories, and different diasporic relationships to land.

When we started the *LandMarks* project, it had a different name and a different orientation. I was part of the curatorial push for a more critical view. We wanted to think about the ways parks had excluded Indigenous peoples and to consider Canada's ongoing colonialism. Both Camille and Cheryl have spent so much time and research and creative energy exploring in this vein. When I was conceiving the projects and artists who I wanted to work with, I thought "here are two artists who I want to learn from." I knew that you would ask difficult questions about the work and about the occasion.

### GEORGIA PHILLIPS-AMOS

Tania, you have referenced that you made a treaty between you at the onset of the working agreement.

### CAMILLE TURNER

I thought that was beautiful. We asked: How do we work together? How do we create this collaboration? And how do we honor each other as well as the people who we stand on?

### CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE

That was a really beautiful way to start the project, or to continue the project, because it took us a while to get to that place. We realized that that's what we needed to do.

1 This statement is quoted in Candice Hopkins, "Introduction," in *LandMarks2017/Repères2017: Art + Places + Perspectives* (Toronto: The Magenta Foundation and Partners in Art, 2018), 13. Willard herself has written about her experience of being involved

with this project. Tania Willard, "Surfacing, Voicing, and Signalling Freedom in Relational Performance: Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Camille Turner's *Freedom Tours*" *PUBLIC* 64 (2021): 23–31.

**CAMILLE TURNER**

I feel like I learned so much. It was this kind of deep learning and we did a lot of things together, spent a lot of time together.

**CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE**

I remember it worked out nicely that we had the oldest national park east of the Rocky Mountains, with Thousand Islands, and with Rouge we also had the newest national park in the region.

**TANIA WILLARD**

The project started to come together when you both took one of these tourist tours of Thousand Islands National Park.

**CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE**

Oh, yeah, that was mind-blowing.

**CAMILLE TURNER**

Absolutely. I mean, it was triggering, going on that boat tour and hearing the false histories and the perspectives that were presented. It really released something in both of us. It was almost like a challenge that needed to be answered, do you agree?

**CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE**

It was all a big fucking lie they had made up. They had completely decided that Native people are a long-ago vanished race. They had decided to make up some stories about them and take you on a little boat ride and tell you some fables. It was outlandish.

**CAMILLE TURNER**

We found out more and more about the land and the waters as we went along. We started meeting folks within the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe communities, and presenting the stories that we had heard on the boat to them. They'd say: "What? Those are not our stories!" It was very interesting doing something on water as a passageway, as a transportation network. There was also, for me, a strong tie to the middle passage.

**GEORGIA PHILLIPS-AMOS**

How did you go about mapping out this much richer narrative? Who did you turn to?

**CAMILLE TURNER**

It was so freaking massive.

**TANIA WILLARD**

You each drew from your networks for these larger collaborations, too. We built networks of collaboration on board the boat. That was really incredible. There were so many folks.

**CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE**

We needed to create a narrative that we thought was true and authentic, and also respectful to the many other artists that we brought in. We weren't the mouthpieces. We involved so many other voices and we didn't want anyone to feel like, "Oh, I got roped into this weird-ass project that actually violates my personal beliefs." I wanted the feeling to be one of "I actually get to be upheld and have my being respected."

CAMILLE TURNER

You know all of these histories are here. It's just that we are oriented to look a certain way. Look over here! And that defines the space. What we are doing is opening up a space so that all of these stories that are silenced can be heard, can be seen. It's quite palpable when that bubble bursts and you can see that there's way more than you realized was there.

We were uncovering things and having to deal with them. We did a lot of archival research to find some of these stories and spoke to a lot of people. It is this constant kind of stripping away of that colonial layer so that we can see and understand more and feel more. Sometimes it is hard emotional labor to do this work and it's such a privilege to be able to be that vessel to bring these stories.

GEORGIA PHILLIPS-AMOS

Who was the audience? Did they know this was an artwork or were they just trying to go for a boat tour?

TANIA WILLARD

I think it was a bit of both. We definitely advertised the project, and there was an audience coming to *LandMarks2017* events. But then there were some people who just saw it and said, "I'll take a free bus ride to a free cruise!"

CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE

When we did the tour with our story and with our participants, the boat company actually said: "Could you come back and do this every year?" This was wonderful, because they had realized they were hearing and experiencing the real thing.

Some other people who came felt like hostages on the boat, which was another interesting feature. I actually remember one woman covered her ears for the whole time.

CAMILLE TURNER

She just sat there. When we were ripping up the flags, some people were afraid you could get arrested.

CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE

Those flags were from the dollar store!

STÉPHANIE HORNSTEIN

Can the script from the tour be read? Was it ever published?

CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE

It wasn't published. The reason it wasn't published is an interesting question of intellectual property. We had licensed a portion of the Two Row Wampum and the Dish with One Spoon story from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, but we had licensed it only for the two days of the boat tour. I remember it became a point of contention with *LandMarks*, because they wanted to publish *everything*. We gave them everything, but without that. And they were like "Well, there's something missing." And we said: "Well, you can't just own things because you're in power. There are ways of doing things and, sorry, you'd have to make a relationship with them." I was very proud of us, that we said: "Nope, you don't get



/figs. 1-3/ Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Camille Turner, *Freedom Tours*, 2017. Performance, Thousand Islands National Park. Curated by Tania Willard as part of *Repères2017/LandMarks2017*. Photos: Jalani Morgan.

the full script.” We stayed true to the agreement that we made to only own those words for two days.

TANIA WILLARD

There was a real struggle throughout the whole project for all artists and curators around the role of Parks Canada. Some of the parks wanted a tighter grip on the projects and how they would introduce them to their audiences. They are not used to working with artists in this way. In the case of *Freedom Tours*, they wanted to see and approve the script. I spent a lot of time battling this directive. It didn’t work, logistically, to have a bureaucratic review.

Originally, we were supposed to dock at one of the islands, but we realized that when you are navigating the waterways, you aren’t technically within the park. So we made a decision, between myself, Cheryl, and Camille, that we weren’t going to be part of this process to have the tour script approved, and we decided to circumvent their protocol. This was also really resonant with the politics at that time, in that it mirrored the refugee crises happening where boats couldn’t land. I think that’s a really important, little-known part of negotiating the project that also speaks to the kind of stories that you were telling.

CHERYL L’HIRONDELLE

That’s actually why the Two Row Wampum story that we licensed fit so well. I remember we said, “We’re not docking and this is why: we’re honoring this wampum agreement that says you stay in your boat, we’ll stay in our boat and we can both be on this water together.” It worked with this notion of being autonomous. Not docking generated its own symbolism.

TANIA WILLARD

We wanted to ask you about what you saw as the role of water, specifically, in the boat tour. How might the water have permitted certain things that landing on land wouldn’t have? The Canadian–US border goes straight through the St. Lawrence River. How did you engage with that idea of the artificial national border asserted through this natural formation?

CAMILLE TURNER

Yeah, I mean, there’s definitely synergies going on there with the Middle Passage and the Black Atlantic. I feel like this boat was such an important vehicle for stories that needed to be told from inside of a body of water.

CHERYL L’HIRONDELLE

The protest that we staged on the boat was a way to sort of refute nationalism and borders. It was a way for us to say we all need to be protesting against exclusionary practices: national borders, class boundaries, or even stories that are so cherry picked. For me, the protest was a way to say “there is no border.” The story that we told, restating the history of the place, far superseded that line.

CAMILLE TURNER

We wanted to focus on elemental things. Just thinking about water and its connection to Indigenous and Black experiences was so rich. All that history of violence, but also all the history of life. We were

creating a counterpoint to the stories being told. As to the border, it is a space that sliced different Indigenous nations in two. Being on board and defying that border created this sense of expansiveness. It kind of remapped the meaning of this place.

**GEORGIA PHILLIPS-AMOS**

It also really just draws attention to the archipelago as a site that is obviously not cut in half, into these two countries.

**CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE**

Right, the formation of the land itself and the water around it defies that.

What is super problematic about it, as well, is that those waters have become a site for the international transport of goods. The Haudenosaunee specifically have been severely affected by the trenching of that river so big ships could pass through. It robs them of their place on so many levels. That was another undercurrent of what we were dealing with by choosing the boat.

**TANIA WILLARD**

I was really struck by the islands that were submerged as a result of the system of locks put into place. At the time, it was a real nation-building benchmark, in a similar way to the railway, building a waterway to Ottawa via the St Lawrence from the Atlantic. In our conversations with Indigenous communities, we heard stories of people collecting sap on different islands that are underwater now. In our writing of the tour script, we were thinking through this kind of surfacing of histories and stories and voices that have perhaps been submerged.

**STÉPHANIE HORNSTEIN**

From the videos on Camille's website it does look like a lot of people engaged with it quite earnestly, making the signs and listening to the singing. So it sounds like you got quite a variety of responses.

**CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE**

I think there's something about the Round Dance at the end. I think it was probably a relief in some way. It was a relief and a release and it was a way to say okay, we enjoyed this passage.

**GEORGIA PHILLIPS-AMOS**

Right, they knew they were safe.

**CAMILLE TURNER**

We'd released them.

**STÉPHANIE HORNSTEIN**

How was the relationship with the participants at Rouge Park? It was a totally different group of people.

**CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE**

This is the newest national park, it is an urban national park and it was with children. It was about the next generation and we became aunts who needed to let the kids know stuff, and engage them, but let them speak too, which was really lovely, and they had some things to say.



/fig. 4/ Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Camille Turner, *Freedom Tours*, 2017. Performance, Rouge National Urban Park. Curated by Tania Willard as part of *Repères2017/LandMarks2017*. Photo: Samay Arcentales Cajas.

**CAMILLE TURNER**

It was quite beautiful. They made these banners. They conceptualized them. They decided which creatures, which beings, they were going to protect, and it was just lovely.

**CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE**

We sprung it on them that they would be addressing mother earth and explaining why they made the banner. I loved that it wasn't scripted. It was wonderful to see them step up to the megaphone. Some of them were quite shy but decided that they had something to say.

**TANIA WILLARD**

I remember the impetus of this project came from a site visit. It is an urban park, so there is a lot of contrast with Thousand Islands. The contrast between the parks was a lot to conceptualize as artists, as it is one work, bridging these two parks.

**CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE**

The cleaning-up was our subversive response to being asked by the institution to provide documentation of our progress. When we went through the Rouge Park, the roadkill and the garbage were shocking. So, on April 22nd, Earth Day, Camille and I donned hazmat suits and we did a performance to post on the website. The performance was this documentation of the fact that we were engaged in a process towards the commission.

**CAMILLE TURNER**

Here's the newest national park and then the Line 9 pipeline? The bitumen! That was another shocking discovery. There are these protected wetlands, and then this pipeline that runs through a lot of places that should have been protected, and a lot of First Nations. Right there in the middle of everything.

**TANIA WILLARD**

All of your projects, including in Rouge, had these really participatory elements. Maybe even more so in Rouge, because you worked with kids. It all spoke to your ways of keeping people engaged. The walk was long. It was fun and also had all these really critical and important elements to it that weren't relaxed. There was something expected of you, but also a lot returned to you. Both performances were journeys, right? One on the water, and one through this walk.

**CHERYL L'HIRONDELLE**

We walked that land many, many times. We went through every possible idea for how we would move around. I think the reason we stayed on the road was for accessibility. That was also where we had done the April 22nd performance. This was a road that people from the nearby community would use as a cheat to get into town, and that's why there was so much detritus. People just zoom down this road that isn't policed, throwing garbage into the ditch, even though they're in a national park—they're on land, for Christ's sake.

We got the police to actually close that road so there'd be no thoroughfare for that day. That was a beautiful act of resistance, saying, "Actually no, this isn't your road. This is a site of learning, a site of coming together, a site for the children to

consider.” I think it was really cool for the kids to see that you can have a space that is for you.

GEORGIA PHILLIPS-AMOS

Did you run into any of the same kind of tension or friction with the Rouge project that you had at Thousand Islands, with the park system?

CHERYL L’HIRONDELLE

Parks didn’t come!

CAMILLE TURNER

Yeah, what was up with that?

TANIA WILLARD

Rouge is such a different entity because it spans municipalities and districts. That park is still forming, right? They’re still doing land purchases. It is a strange configuration of a park. We did have a few meetings with Parks folks, but it was a lot more hands-off than others. For better or worse, there was a lesser sense of ownership, and more distributed responsibilities. We were left to our own devices a lot more.

GEORGIA PHILLIPS-AMOS

I wonder, Tania, if you can say anything about how you kept all the moving parts together?

TANIA WILLARD

It was important to me to really question the authority of Parks Canada. I had to deal with them so much, but I also had a parallel process where I would reach out to the closest nation. Cheryl and Camille both helped with this. We would write letters about the project and invite people to come who had stories, connections, ownership, authority, and protocols in those spaces. This was so important to contesting the idea of the Parks system.

Then there were the individual parks, with their individual staff. There was a lot of negotiating and representing. I hope that I was able to do that for Cheryl and Camille, because we did face some challenges. I had to steer the expectation away from a “parks programming” kind of model or a desire for a singular sculpture placed in a park. The only reason I could make it through all of that was because I chose artists who had such a depth of knowledge in working with communities in socially engaged practices. I think I’m still learning lessons about what the potentials are to create spaces for artwork, criticality, and understanding, outside of gallery walls, and how important that work is, because only certain people ever go to the gallery.

CHERYL L’HIRONDELLE

Personally, as an artist, I would never choose to make a work for Canada or for a national park, because of what you’re entering into and supporting by doing that. It could only work with Tania Willard, because I understand your incredible ethics and your ideologies, and I respect you so much. Then you suggested that I work with Camille, who, similarly, I have incredible respect for. Any other reason for doing it would be to support that colonial machine.

TANIA WILLARD

In the beginning, when I interviewed as a curator, the project was called *Art Tracks* and it followed the railway line, engaging several artists for standalone art projects. It was more celebratory and they appropriated Indigenous imagery in the original brochures. Once they got seven of us curators together we were able to change things. It was a big journey, and I couldn't have done it without working with artists who have such integrity in their work. It is lovely to revisit it and that magic you both made happen.