

# TEXT /

## Missy LeBlanc

As I sit on my balcony with the spring sun filtering through the budding branches and the robins sing their morning song, I dream of another world, another life. A world that isn't defined by fear of something we cannot see, something that has caused great harm. A world where the labour to care for ourselves and one another is not looked at as a burden of necessity, but an act of joy, of love. It seems erroneous and nonsensical to try to think and write around the fact that we are in the midst of a global pandemic. It has affected—and will continue to for years—the way we live our day-to-day lives and how we operate with one another.

Jennifer Brant and Jennifer Ireland's exhibition, *in the long grass like the ocean, where the ocean used to be*, was developed in the pre-pandemic world where it was supposed to take place. Centred on themes of care and decolonial relationships to the environment, the exhibition's intention was to listen and respond to the lands that are currently called Alberta and British Columbia. However, the approach in its creation needed to shift as their physical exhibition on this land could not happen. The exhibition has, by necessity, altered to respond to the current crisis, a crisis that is still mutating while we try to navigate through it.

*in the long grass like the ocean, where the ocean used to be*, asks us to consider the relationships we have with the environment, including the non-human life found within. What if these relationships carried the same weight as those that we call kin—a relationship built on love and care? What would that care look like for our non-human kin?

The artists' research has parallels to many Indigenous ontologies, where humans are not the centre of creation nor the centre of relationships. Kinship bonds and networks extend to, and between, the non-human world—to the plants and animals that feed us, the air and water that gives us life, to the land beneath our feet that nurtures us. Kinship networks with the non-human are all around us and impact us deeply. Down to the core, we carry these kin with us.

The human body is home to trillions of microorganisms living beneath our nails, in our lungs, throughout our digestive tract, and covering our skin. Although some of these microorganisms can harm us, we have a mutualistic relationship with most; we sustain them, and they sustain us by providing nutrients, vitamins, and protection. When we wash our hands to get rid of the microbial life that can do us harm in order to *stay safe*, letting the suds of the soap breakdown and drown them as water engulfs our hands, we are inadvertently decimating the population of micro-kin that mean us no harm. The relationship we have with the microbial life on our skin is broken, washed away, and floating down the drain. A burial ritual that is repeated with wash after wash after wash.

Like the human body, the soil that lies beneath our feet and grows our food is filled with microorganisms, working and bonded together in harmony, protecting plants from stress and providing them with much-needed nutrients. This boundless cellular community nurtures our food and nurtures us, building relations along the way. However, modern invasive agricultural methods that focus on greater yields, coupled with the increased use of fungicides, herbicides, and insecticides, have led to soil depletion—a decrease in the microbial life found in the soil that provides the nutrients needed for plants to grow. The depletion of micro-kin in the soil has led to less nutritious food and a depleted gut microbiome, the kin that we carry with us.

Although “care is a human trouble, this does not make care a human-only matter.”<sup>1</sup> What if we imbued the soil, the microorganisms found within it, and the microorganisms within and on us, with the same tenderness and care as we would our human kin? Would we then mourn our lost micro-kin as part of our ritualized handwashing? Would we come up with new technologies so as to not harm our relationships with micro-kin? Would we stop putting profit and higher agricultural yields over soil health? Would we stop treating the land and all that surrounds us as commodities? Would we live with the resources given, rather than ravaging the land for more more more?

How can we care for our non-human kin when “care” is such an elusive thing? What does it mean to *take care*, to *hold care*, to *care for*? The phrase “take care” connotes that “care” is no longer in your possession and that it must be retrieved, taken back. Is care something that is tangible that you can hold, that can be taken from you or that we can lose? What happened to the care we held so deeply for ourselves and our kin—human and non? To care for yourself and kin in a time of deep turbidity requires effort and labour, but what does that labour look like? Is it worth the effort?

I pose these questions with no definitive answer, but with hope and provocation. Hope that if we reimagine the relationships with the non-human world, these kinship networks will lead to new ways of problem solving. If we de-centred the human and looked at our relationships with non-human beings as dialogical, we could break the cycle of abundance and scarcity. It will not come easy as we navigate the structures in place that are in opposition to the praxis of care, but it is our responsibility to do the work to *take care*. Hopefully, in our post-pandemic world to come, care is not something that we fight for or have to take back, rather, it is given freely to all our kin and is seen as a labour of love rather than one of survival.

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<sup>1</sup> María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 2.

## **BIOGRAPHY /**

Missy LeBlanc is a curator and writer of Métis, nêhiyaw, and Polish ancestry. LeBlanc is the inaugural Curatorial Resident at TRUCK Contemporary Art in Calgary, AB where she worked on a major project that included two exhibitions and a one day gathering centered around Indigenous language revitalization and Indigenous epistemologies. She was the winner of the 2019 Middlebrook Prize for Young Canadian Curators and a runner-up for the 2019 Canadian Art Writing Prize. LeBlanc was born and raised in amiskwaciwâskahikan and is currently based in Mohkinstsis.