



Heartlands/Pays du cœur

Geohumanities and Québec's 'regional' fiction

A project by Ceri Morgan

Photograph by Kélcsey Swain



Arts and
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Introduction

Heartlands / Pays du cœur took place during 2020 (4.5 months) and 2022-24. Its focus was the Eastern Townships and l'Estrie (the administrative region established in 1981), in southeastern Québec. Some elements of the project were carried out in the city-region of Stoke-on-Trent, UK.

The research was dual stranded; with a literary geographies thread and a creative geohumanities thread. It sought to examine how literary landscapes represented in post-2000 novels, short stories, and creative nonfiction set in the Eastern Townships/l'Estrie connect with material ones, to inform individuals' understandings and experiences of spaces and places outside Montréal. It also sought to develop collaborative, participatory and multidisciplinary research methods, to broaden the dissemination of findings outside of academic circles, and to inform the emerging field of Geohumanities which, as its name suggests, brings together approaches and methods from Geography and Humanities, and, frequently, the Arts.

Conceived and led by Ceri Morgan, Professor of Place-writing and Geohumanities at Keele University, the project emerged from an interest in 'hors-Montréal', or the Rest of Québec (ROQ).

"From the mid-1940s onwards, Montréal dominated literary studies and was the prime setting for fiction in French and English. Heartlands/Pays du cœur grew from a desire to complicate popular understandings of the rural and regional as a homogeneous space." - Ceri Morgan

The project was preceded by a series of 'Heartlands' articles (2007-2011), co-organisation of the 'Heartlands and Hinterlands' conference (Canada House, 2010), and a special journal issue co-edited with Daniel Laforest (*British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 24.2, 2011). It was inspired and informed by a pilot project at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS)/Centre d'histoire orale et de récits numérisés (CHORN) supported by a Leverhulme Trust International Academic Fellowship, 2014-15. This saw Ceri receive training in oral history, digital recording and editing, and geomapping.

Since 2014, Ceri has been working in participatory arts as well as continuing to do desk-based research. In preparation for undertaking such a large-scale and multi-faceted collaboration; between artists, academics and laypersons, across two countries, in both French and English, Ceri undertook training in Place-making and Co-Creation Leadership (Staffordshire University), Oral History (Oral History Society), and Media (Keele University). She assembled an advisory board comprising expertise in Québec literature, Canadian Literature, Geography, Performance, Participatory Methods, Digital Mapping. She also engaged consultants (two French-speaking, one English-speaking) with expertise in geopoetics in Québec, and the sociology of the Eastern Townships. Ceri also benefited from mentorship from senior colleagues in Geography and English Literature.

Initial Research Questions

How are spaces and places outside Montréal represented in post-1960 fiction in Québec published in French and English?

How do fictional landscapes connect with material ones to inform individuals' understanding and experiencing of spaces and places?

How does 'new regional writing' shape conceptions of relationships between major urban centres, secondary towns and non- and/or ex-urban spaces and places in an economically and technologically globalised world?

How can creative processes contribute to:

- understandings of bodily experiencing of space, place and time?
- broader public engagement with research?
- dissemination of research findings in the form of non-academic outputs?

How can methods from outside literary studies (geography, oral history) contribute to emerging scholarship in Geohumanities?

Challenges

Initially conceived as an 18 month project, the timeline of Heartlands/Pays du cœur was greatly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, both in practical terms (due to restrictions on movement and social contact) and due to the contraction of Long Covid causing long term illness for the lead researcher, Ceri Morgan. The project was suspended for approximately 1 year. Protracted administrative processes between universities in Canada and the UK also derailed the project work plan, particularly in contracting a research assistant, who was responsible for collecting oral histories from current and former residents of the Eastern Townships/l'Estrie. These factors combined to greatly extend the project, which inevitably had some detrimental effects. Most notably, for this report, delays meant that the digital outputs will not be launched until after the report's submission, which limits the degree to which wider impact can be evidenced.

Therefore, the report focuses on the creation and potential of project outputs, and the professional development opportunities and experiences of participants and collaborators.

Outputs and Outcomes

Digital Map

Working alongside creative technologist, Kelcey Swain, and sound and media artist, Yannick Guéguen, Ceri Morgan conceived a digital map that plots audio recordings of readings of excerpts of regional fiction and creative nonfiction in French and English onto corresponding locations in the Eastern Townships/l'Estrie, enriched by bespoke ambient soundscapes, sound ecologies, and photographs.

Excerpts were chosen by Ceri based on her reading of holdings at la Grande Bibliothèque (Montréal), read by the authors themselves, and recorded at Planet Studios, Montréal, Cellovision Productions, Ayer's Cliff, and Studio C, Sherbrooke. The range of texts included literary fiction, humour, memoir, and genre fiction, including chick lit. A selection of authors also took part in interviews about their writing practices and the importance of particular spaces and places in their works. These interviews were recorded and transcribed, and, with authors' permissions, extracts were included in an exhibition at Chapters Cafe, Keele University Campus (Jun 2024), alongside photographs by Ceri and Kelcey.

16 authors contributed to the map, but there were some notable absences, including Louise Penny, the region's best-known writer, and Johanne Seymour, another well-known murder-mystery writer. Other absences include authors representing science fiction and some queer texts. Whilst not published in great numbers, there are some examples of SF, counter-cultural, and queer fiction from the region. Absences were due to a variety of reasons, including a lack of availability on the part of some invited writers.



Top left- Denis Coupal, Ceri Morgan, Kelcey Swain, Planet Studios, Montréal.

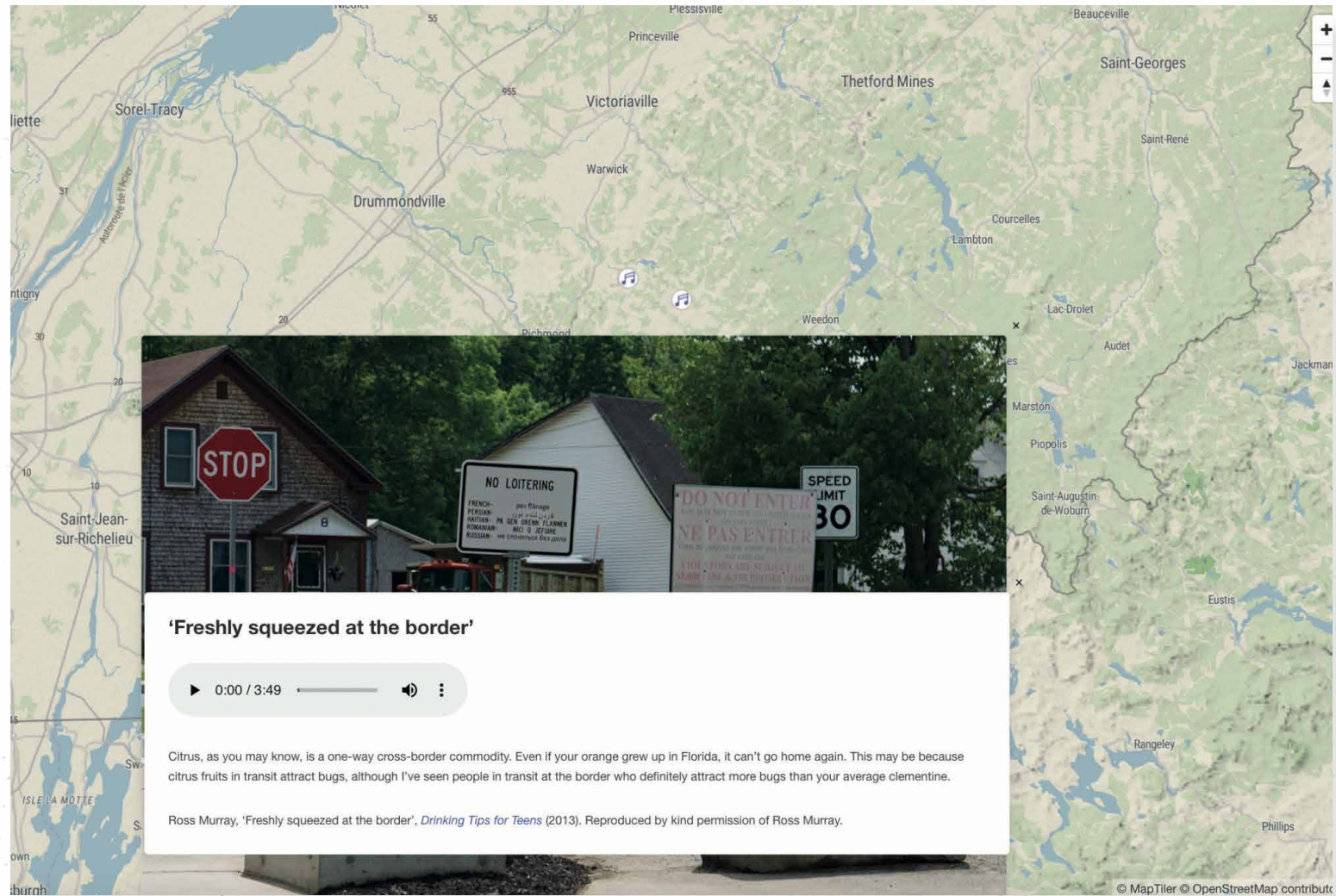
Middle left- Liane Keightley, Planet Studios.

Bottom left- Louise Abbott, Cellovision Productions, Ayer's Cliff.

Top right- Ross Murray, Studio C, Sherbrooke.

Bottom right- Kelcey Swain, Nick Fonda, Le Tassé - Café de quartier.

The map will be available on the project website, with the intention that it be shared and promoted by authors, publishers, and local organisations like museums and tourist information centres in the Eastern Townships/l'Estrée. Other assets such as interview transcripts will be retained to inform and inspire future work on the literature of the Eastern Townships.



Collaborating Artist Impact

"As an expert in sound and field recording I gained a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, representations of sound and place through visual media."

The process of creating the digital map was inherently a learning experience, as it was not something which existed 'off-the-shelf'.

Exploring and embedding media in a map of a place I personally visited was a process which enhanced the link between data and knowledge in my understanding of the world."

- Lead Map Producer, Kelcey Swain

"For me, it was a great experience to follow Ceri and observe her process of work, throughout and during the visit to Magog."

I was also able to visit professional studios and meet writers, while having the chance to listen to them during recordings. I thank her for trusting me with editing sounds and adjusting the rhythm of the stories."

It was fascinating to immerse myself in texts and their interpretations."

- Sound Artist, Yannick Guéguen

Additional outputs- Exhibition

Chapters Cafe, Keele University Campus (Jun 2024). An exhibition of interview excerpts by participating authors and photography by Kelcey Swain

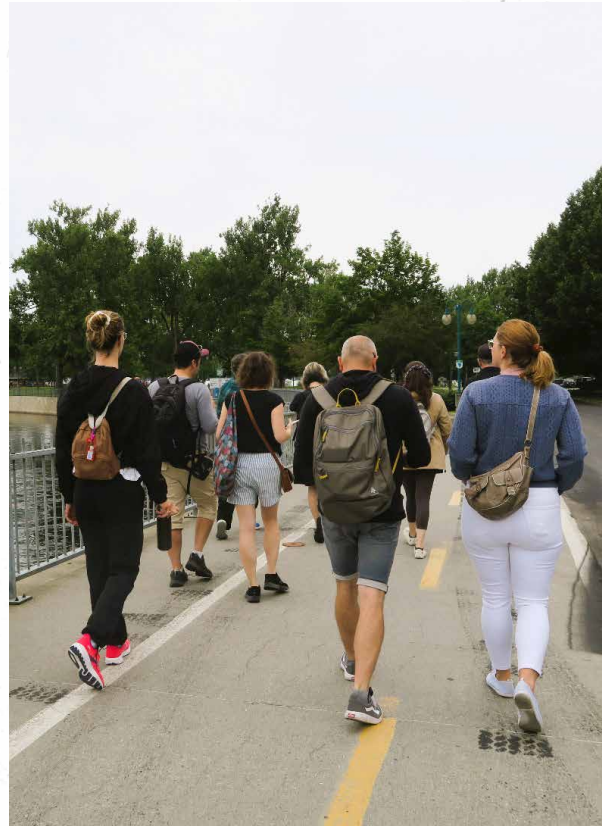


Audio Walk

An audio walk was written and designed by Ceri to disseminate the findings of desk-based research and interviews; evoking themes and ideas that had emerged from close readings of creative prose (fiction and creative non-fiction) in French and English, contextualised research, and interviews with writers. The piece includes soundscapes and sound ecologies by sound artist Philip Lichti and extracts from oral history interviews with current and former residents of the region, carried out by Research Assistant Eleni Polychronakos, of Concordia University.

The audio walk guides listeners on a planned route along the lake front (Lake Memphremagog) at Magog. Conceived with a focus on accessibility – the route is paved and flat – and alternative ways of learning, the walk offers participants ways to experience and understand the project's primary research findings bodily, as well as intellectually. The walk was scripted in English by Ceri and then professionally translated into French by literary translator, Margaret Rigaud.

The audio walk was trialled collectively three times between July 2023 and June 2024, in order to further shape and refine it. It was trialled in Magog with members of the geopoetics group, La Traversée and COHDS (July 2023), and again with general community members (October 2023). Later, the walk was trialled with colleagues, an artist, and PhD students on a lakeside site in the grounds of Keele University. The final version of the audio walk will be available to hear and download on the Heartlands/Pays du cœur website when it is launched.



Trialling the audio-walk with La Traversée and COHDS, Magog, July 2023. Photograph by Anne Brigitte Renaud



Trialling the audio-walk with community members, Magog, October 2023

Oral Histories

Research Assistant Eleni Polychronakos of Concordia University joined the project in Autumn 2023, to help collect local stories and experiences of the region. She conducted one-to-one interviews with current and former residents, and supported Ceri in holding a 'Café causerie' at l'Espace culturel de Magog. Ceri devised the 'Café causerie' – essentially a sharing of stories over coffee and sweet treats – to allow community members to feed into the project. With participants' permission, extracts from the oral history interviews undertaken by Eleni were included in the audio walk to enrich it with local place-based knowledge, and to ensure Ceri's was not the only voice speaking about the region. Ceri and Eleni had hoped to include the experiences of people from working class backgrounds who had a connection to the area's industrial past, but despite attempts to reach such people through newspaper and radio interviews and adverts, none were forthcoming. As noted earlier, slow procurement and contracting processes between Keele and Concordia Universities meant that Eleni joined the project later than anticipated, limiting the time available to build relationships and delve deeper into the community.

Eleni Polychronakos- Research Assistant

Eleni started working with oral histories at the start of her PhD at Concordia University. She felt like an "imposter" because she thought that, at PhD level, she should already be an expert. Ceri was very encouraging, and gave Eleni a lot of positive and constructive feedback, as well as freedom and trust in her methods. By the end of the project, Eleni had gained in confidence, and now feels she can legitimately call herself an oral historian.

"At the beginning of the project I did not consider myself an oral historian but now I do. So that was pretty transformative, actually."

Eleni feels that administrative barriers further affected the diversity of the interviewee pool. In future iterations of this methodology, Eleni believes that seeking to obtain consent orally could make participation much more accessible, particularly for elderly people, for whom lengthy written participant information documents and consent forms may be too off-putting. Oral consent is currently not permissible in a UK research context, however.

"The audio tour is a masterclass in combining creative writing with place based knowledge." - Sharing event attendee



Photograph from the 'Café causerie', featuring Research Assistant Eleni Polychronakos (standing).

Challenges

Making links with the English speaking writing community, for participation in the audio walk, proved to be more difficult than anticipated.

In an attempt to reach out to English-language writers and residents, Ceri gave an online talk about the project for the English-language association QUESCREN- Concordia University, in September 2023. The talk was well attended, but it garnered no further engagement beyond 1 or 2 brief email exchanges. She and Eleni placed an advert in an English-language newspaper, flyers in Black Cat Books, took part in a radio interview on CBC Montréal, and sent emails to the Townshippers Association, various English-language literary festivals, and Brome Lake Books, Knowlton.

In response to one comment by an emerging English-speaking writer, Ceri held an open mic night in an English-language bookshop in Lennoxville (Black Cat Books). It was attended by just 4 people, all multilingual, including one author from the map and a member of the geopoetics group, La Traversée, of which Ceri is a long-term member. No English-speaking community members from the region participated in the audio-walk trial in October 2023. Although several signed up, they cancelled at the last minute or didn't show up.

Low engagement from English-speaking participants can be attributed to a number of factors, one being that the audio walk trial fell on the last weekend of good Autumn weather (it snowed the following week), that the English-language project consultant wasn't as engaged in advocacy as their French-language counterparts, and that the English-speaking community in the region is now very small, representing around 4% of the population.



Open mic night, Black Cat Books,
Lennoxville, October 2023

Creative responses

Trialling the audio walk provoked creative responses from participants in both the countries. Sarah Burgoyne and Ceri wrote poems in response to the audio walk trial in Magog in July 2023, and several people wrote, and one person made visual art, in response to the trial at Keele, in June 2024.

Those who participated in the Keele audio walk shared their writing at a dedicated reading event at Chapters Cafe in Keele in June 2024. This was an additional project output, and was attended by 17 people, comprising walk participants and audience members from the Keele campus. These outcomes demonstrate the potential of the audio walk to inspire contemplation and creativity when it becomes available to wider audiences in late Summer 2024. Feedback also suggests its potential to transport people to the Eastern Townships, and engender a more intimate relationship with the walk location.

"The wide variety of artefacts are so creative and innovative. The methods developed are quite inspiring." -Rachel Bright. Senior lecturer, Keele

"A warm and intimate event with wonderful readings that involved the Heartlands of Québec. Although I have not visited, I felt it come alive in the readings, complimented by stunning photography." - Sylvia Crawley, PhD student, Keele

"Inspired me to produce a poem in response, and think about the Keele landscape, history, and personal effects on me. I've worked/researched here for over 20 years and the poem made me rethink my perspective of Keele." - Lizzy, PhD student, Keele



Top and middle: photographs from the Keele audio walk trial, June 2024, taken by Rebecca Goldsmith. Bottom: Keele and Magog, photo montage by Rebecca Goldsmith.

Rebecca Goldsmith

Keele Audio Walk Participant

Rebecca, a PhD student of Creative Writing at Keele, shares her experience of taking part in the audio walk at Keele, June 2024.

"I haven't tried the audio walk on location at Magog, but I have been to the lake there in the past and so it was really interesting to see how the two places began to layer themselves in my imagination."

I really enjoyed how the prompts felt equally relevant across both sites, and the experience of taking time to respond creatively to the lake at Keele whilst my mind was also transported back to Magog. It became a kind of conversation in my head between the two places, and the literary references to Québec writers are now impressed upon specific sites along the Keele route for me."

There were magic moments where two things seemed to align serendipitously - introducing the idea of murder mysteries at a point where we were tracking into a forest and a ghostly rope was hanging from a tree, geese on the soundtrack and goslings at Keele, and running water that seemed to provide a direct channel of connection. The industrial heritage of both locations chimed well with one another, and the presence of trees as a constant in each."

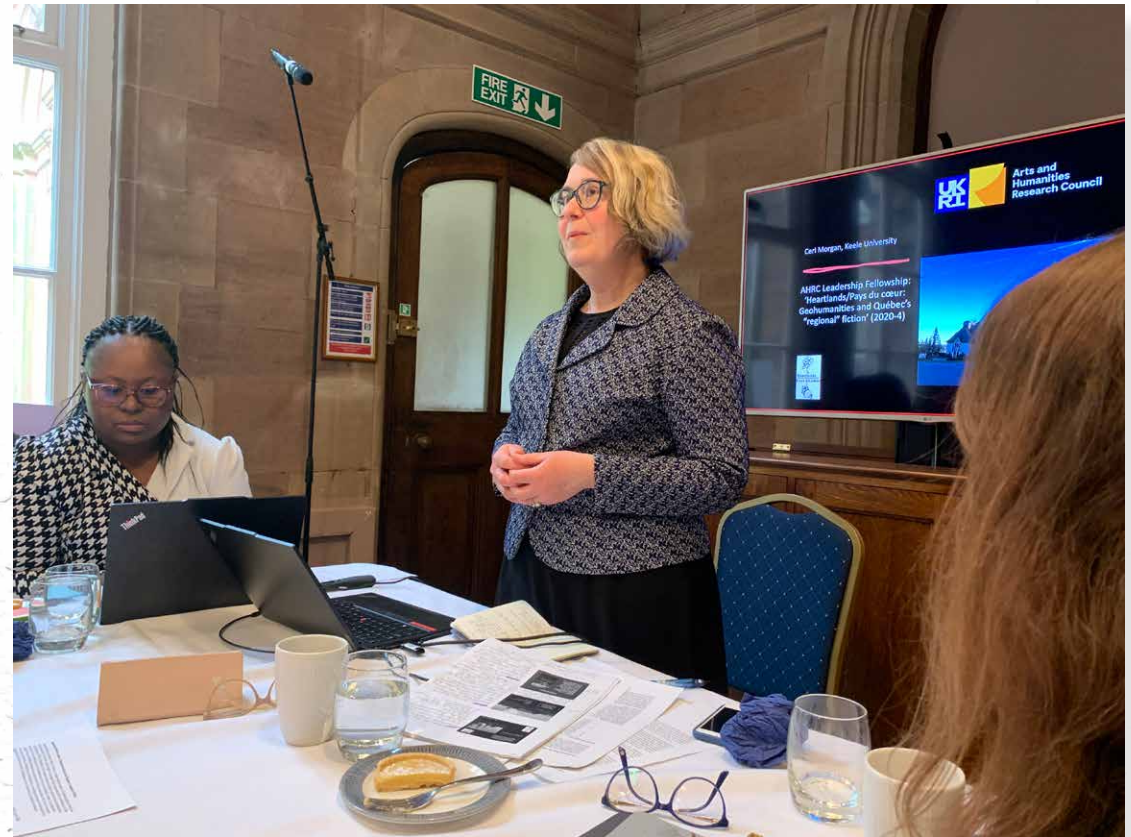
The experience of the walk has created a new set of creative memories for me at Keele, and has enriched my experience of studying there as well as providing enjoyable reminders of past travels to Canada. It was a lovely form of escapism that will stay with me."

Sharing Event

In April 2024, Ceri held an event at Keele Hall, to share the findings of her research and invite discussion and contributions from an invited in-person audience and a general online audience. The audience comprised in-person attendees from Keele University, both PhD students and faculty members from Geography and Humanities departments, academics from other UK universities, and project research assistant, Eleni Polychronakos and artist collaborator, Clare Reynolds. Joining online were members of the project advisory board, and the geopoetics group La Traverseé, participating authors, and the general public.

Before the event began, in-person attendees were given the opportunity to trial the audio walk around the lake next to Keele Hall. At the event, they were able to view a small exhibition of photographs and excerpts from author interviews, view and try out the digital map, and see a performance of the project dance, 'Heartlands: Earth & Bones' outside the building. The audience heard a presentation from Ceri on the main body of the research and findings, a presentation by Eleni on the oral histories interviews she undertook, a reading by Sarah Burgoyne of a poem she wrote in response to the audio walk trial in Magog in July 2023, and a talk by choreographer, Clare Reynolds about the processes and themes that inspired the solo dance piece. The event concluded with questions, and discussion from attendees in-person and online.

"An example of best practice. It is such a cross-cutting project, taking in creative practice, participation and academic elements- influential in many ways." - event attendee



Ceri presenting the project at the sharing event, Keele Hall. 26.04.24.

After the event, all questionnaire respondents said that their knowledge and understanding of Québec's Eastern Townships, L'Estrie and the region's literature had increased, and all said they were 'likely' or 'very likely' to draw on the methods described in their own research/arts practices.

The event led attendees to question how work is placed in local, regional, national, international contexts, how places are shaped by their industrial pasts, and to consider if all places are impacted by deindustrialisation.

Attendees reported that their definition of literary studies had been expanded. They were interested in how creative practice, participation and academic outputs can navigate together, enmesh, interact, and reveal more. One respondent said that the event had made them think differently about regional literatures, especially the specificities of Québécois literature and writing.

"Literary studies- it is a far more expansive space than I imagined."

- event attendee

"Certainly made me think about re-spatialising and rescaling de-industrialisation" - event attendee

"How de-industrialisation can be expressed so brilliantly through movement; the 'de-industrialisation of the body' has offered new ideas for my summer project with the New Vic."

- event attendee

"Is it a cycle of birth, death, renewal? Do we carry it in our bones?" - event attendee



Heartlands: Earth & Bones

Stoke-on-Trent based Dancer and Co-Director of Restoke, Clare Reynolds, was invited to l'Estrie to create and foster movement-based responses to the audio walk route and the region to inform a short solo dance piece. Ceri has collaborated with Restoke on previous projects. Besides being a stand-alone work of art, 'Heartlands: Earth & Bones' represented an experiment in using embodied methods and practices to present action-research. Encountering a vastly different post-industrial landscape to that of her hometown made Clare think differently about Stoke-on-Trent.

"It made me think about the earth- the ground, and what happens to the ground in heavily mined areas. Stoke was excavated for the clay and then even deeper for the coal. It was interesting to think about the literal earth in post-industrial places, and what is happening to that earth- having everything taken from it. I thought about this in a way I've never done before."

Back in the UK, Clare continued to hone her response, and choreographed a solo dance piece for dancer, Patsy Browne-Hope. Patsy performed the piece at Keele Hall as part of the sharing event in April 2024, and again for a film of the dance at Chatterley Whitfield, a former colliery. The film is an addition to proposed outputs that will make the piece accessible to all.

The dance piece explores a number of questions related to the bodily experience of industry. It asks the viewer to reflect on what it means to be a person from a post-industrial place, particularly women. *"How does it manifest in who we are? Can we feel the weight of that industry in our bones? What does it mean to be from a place that was heavy, hard, underground?"*

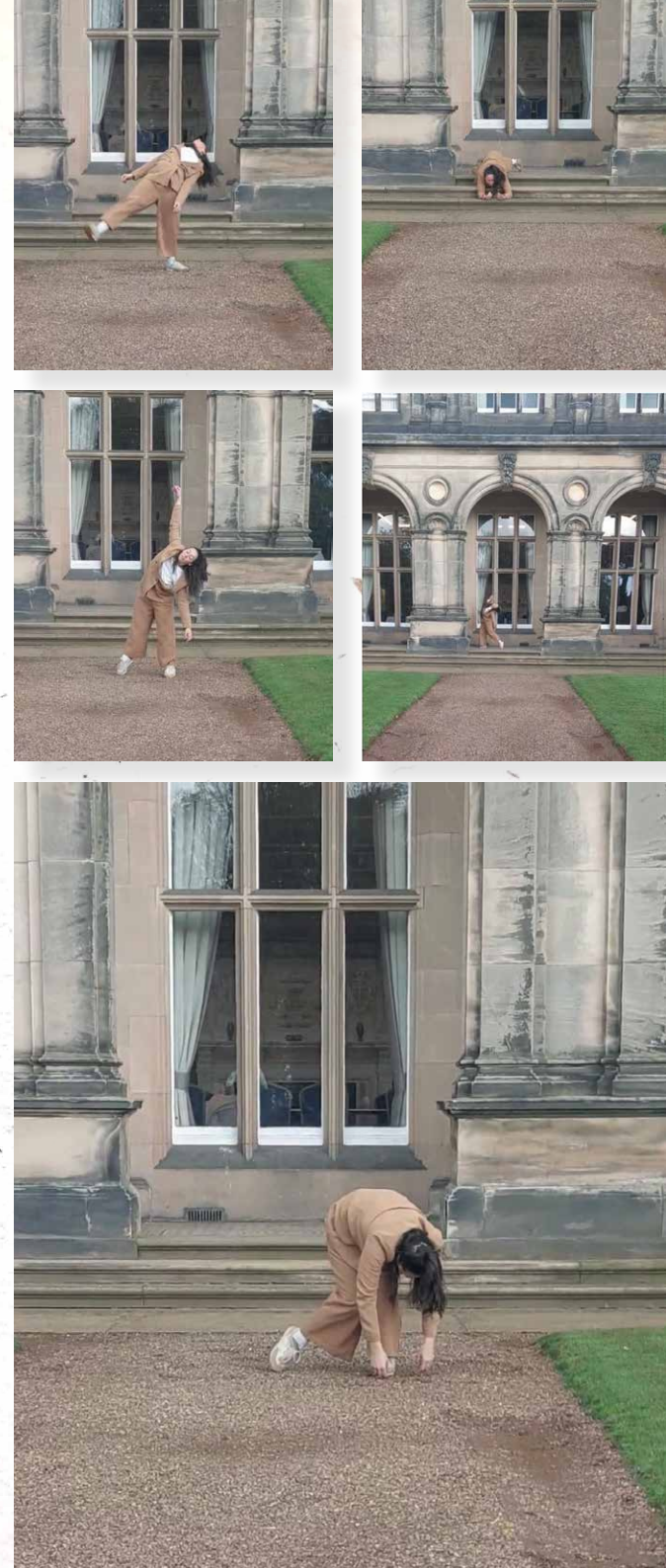
Inspired by the creative writing and fiction involved in the research project, Clare produced a lot of writing of her own. She wrote in abstract, evoking strong images linked to post-industrial landscapes and bodies. Clare took short extracts of this writing into the devising process with dancer, Patsy, and invited her to choose excerpts that resonated with her and improvise in response.

"I think my writing was a way of translating the landscape..." said Clare, "...through feeling and imagery, rather than description, maybe acting as a bridge between Québec and Stoke, and me and Patsy."

In her general practice, Clare is accustomed to co-creation, where her creativity is entangled with the ideas and experiences of many other professional and non-professional performers. This project challenged her to rely solely on her own research practices and creative responses.

"This project encouraged me to trust more in my internal research process. I leaned on my own creative ideas and explorations whereas my work is usually about harnessing other people's. This was a challenge, and a new way of working, but I think it helped me find more confidence in my own artistic voice." - Clare Reynolds

Stills from a filming of Heartlands-Earth & Bones at Keele Hall, 26.04.24.





Top left- Rehearsing at Keele Hall. Top right and bottom left- Filming at Chatterley Whitfield.

First performed during the sharing event at Keele Hall, the dance provoked invited audiences to discuss themes related to the post-industrial experience of place and the seasonal nature of industrial growth and decay, both in l'Estrée and Stoke-on-Trent.

Making site-dance for film was something Clare had never done before. It opened up new artistic opportunities, including collaborating with production company, Junction15, in a more creative way than ever before.

"The solo definitely looked more at home in this space [Chatterley Whitfield] than it did at Keele, and I witnessed Patsy embodying further the emotional connections to the structure of the piece." - Clare Reynolds

Further Dissemination

Conference Paper- Progress in Literary Geography panel, RGS-IBG annual conference 2022

Deathscapes, Murderscapes and Workscapes in Québec's Eastern Townships Fiction

Conference Paper- l'Association des littératures canadienne et québécoise (ALCQ /ACQL), Congress for the Humanities and Social Sciences conference, York University, Ont, 2023

Literary geographies, geopoetics, and de-industrialisation: l'Estrie and the Eastern Townships

Journal article- British Journal of Canadian Studies, 33.2, 225–240. 2021
Québec's new regional fiction: Louise Penny and Johanne Seymour

Book chapter- Cheryl Gosselin et al. (Eds), Québec's Eastern Townships and the World: A Region and its Global Connections (Kingston, Ont: MQUP) 2024

'Québec's new regional fiction and the Eastern Townships: Literary landscapes of de-industrialisation'

Book chapter- David Cooper and Neal Alexander (Eds), Routledge Handbook of Literary Geographies (London: Routledge) 2024

Murderscapes, deathscapes and workscapes in Québec's Eastern Townships fiction and 'immersive literary geographies'

Seminar/workshop- COHDS, Concordia University. November 1, 2023

'Where Literature and Oral History Meet: A Roundtable with Ceri Morgan, Eleni Polychronakos, and Sarah Burgoyne'

Journal article- Writing in progress with Eleni Polychronakos. Possibly for the London Journal of Canadian Studies.

Legacy

As a result of managing a project comprising 40 individual collaborators and stakeholders, Ceri has greatly increased her project management and administrative skills. She has grown in confidence as a creative practitioner, and feels able to use best practice when working with others. Through trials, training and collaboration, Ceri has fostered her own ambitious multi-modal approach to research and creative practice.

"Now I'm confident in calling myself an artist as well as a researcher."

The Heartlands/Pays du cœur website will be launched at the end of Summer, 2024. The Québec Government Office in London has requested a link they might share. Ceri is applying for further funding to help showcase and promote the digital artefacts further, and make more of the relationship between The Eastern Townships and the Stoke-on-Trent city-region and, at a later date, other regions. Her ambition is to bring artists and writers from Québec over to Stoke-on-Trent.

Additional research questions as the project developed include:

- **How can readings of literary texts draw out regional histories of industrialisation and de-industrialisation?**
- **What are the similarities and differences with respect to regions in other deindustrialising countries?**

Conclusions

Heartlands/Pays du cœur was an ambitious project that sought to push beyond the confines of traditional academic research to expand the field of Geohumanities. Its collaborative nature created unlikely connections between people and places, across cultures and disciplines, resulting in a broad and inclusive array of outputs and outcomes. Collaborators grew in knowledge and confidence, both in their own fields, and from opportunities for cross-pollination of skills, perspectives and creative languages.

Such an ambitious project was challenged, and was occasionally interrupted, by the internal processes of the host institutions, and by the unavoidable chaos of the pandemic. Because of this, we are yet to understand the wider or long-term impacts of the methods and outputs created. Despite the global and personal challenges threatening the project, Ceri, with the support of project consultants, advisors and mentors, was able to exceed the output aims, and inspire others with the collaborative, transcultural and multimodal approaches she developed.

"This felt like a well delegated, inclusive project that explored beyond the original project aims."

- Sharing event attendee



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