

for earth day 2023



with [Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves](#), [Alexandra Ionescu](#), [Imani Jackson](#), [Eleni Sikelianos](#) and an axolotl.
at RISD Nature Lab, Providence, RI.

- thank you to Imani for the invitation!

A friend told me that a solar eclipse is beginning over the South Pacific in just a couple of hours. It's a hybrid eclipse—only a narrow band of full darkness arcing over western Australia, Timor and the Papua islands.

The moon is always drawing things forth. It's interesting that the first Earth Day in the U.S. followed the return of the lunar expedition of 1969 by only 9 months--a time when images of the Earth from space were still strange and new and epiphanic. The Earth Day flag itself features an image captured by the Apollo crew while facing the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa.

I wonder what it means for this settler-colonial nation that the first crossing of its so-called final frontier necessarily involved turning back to face the known horizons that colonial dreaming is always trying to push beyond. The image of the Earth from space could be read as a log of the distance that the dream of mastery creates between would-be masters and the living world that keeps eluding them. Which is not to say that the image is not beautiful. It contains so much more than the terms of its capture. "A world of many worlds," looking back at the part of itself that dreamed itself as separate and above. I'm grateful for the chance to really sit with that image...it's too easy to become inured...I wish it were also *just* as easy to see all the others stars from beyond this veil of urban light that is so much brighter than fifty years ago, when that image was taken.

I once took part in a cleanup along the West River, which runs behind a Stop and Shop along the Route of Interstate 95 not far from here. A thick bed of litter pressed into the surface—plastic bottles, old magazines, needles, shreds of clothing, and a profusion of plastic bags. Eventually, after many rounds of picking, I began to see the soil beneath. But the dividing line between the litter and the ground was surprisingly unclear.

At one point I started tugging at a shirt sleeve that poked up from beneath the surface. The fabric had become enmeshed in the roots of surrounding plants and trees, and the tiny roots made a snapping sound as I continued pulling. Most of the fabric eventually tore free, and with it, giant earthworms that had to be shaken or plucked out (lest they also be sent to the landfill). It was progress, of a sort. But the more of the roots and worms that I found, the more I questioned whether my pursuit of trash into ever-deeper layers of living soil was doing more harm than good. There was a satisfaction to filling all those bags. But I don't think we ever asked the place what it really needed.

The Providence River, just steps away from here, was many times bigger for many thousands of years. As a zone of transition between the river valleys and the Narragansett Bay estuary, it has always been a busy place; a hub of cultural life and sustenance for Narragansett, Wampanoag, and other people of the Eastern woodlands. The branch of the river that now runs beneath canal walls just a few blocks north of here is called the Moshassuck, an Algonquin word meaning "where the moose drink."

The thought of a moose on the river strains my imagination. By the time I was born, Providence had already lost over 90% of its wetlands to filling and grading. The flattening of hills, the transformation of ponds into dumps, the turning of rubble from bulldozed neighborhoods into new coastline. As a legacy of solid objects, the city *is* before all else the unmaking of its rivers and wetlands and the more-than-human worlds that they foster.

I grew up with the idea that this river is barren. It is certainly embattled. And yet also very much alive. It has a presence. You can really feel it when you get close, like meeting a wise and generous and soulful person.

This morning, right outside, there were flocks of gulls circling dense schools of menhaden. Along with swans, geese, ducks, and pigeons along the shore. Sometimes a man with a bucket comes around to catch crabs. He also kind of moves like a crab as he plies the undersides of the bridges with a lit cigarette dangling from his mouth. I saw a baby turtle come up to the surface two summers ago.

The ground that constitutes the river's banks looks more like sand than soil. But it's good enough for willows, birch, sunflowers, and rosehip. In 2021, a lone stalk of corn grew to the point of fruiting by the boardwalk down the street. Blue herons sit atop the bridge pylons. And there's a falcon's nest in the Financial District, on the roof of an Art Deco skyscraper. People gather by the dozens every summer night.

I guess I mention all this as a sort of plea for earth with a lowercase e. Earth disturbed, earth unsettled, earth leveraged against water, earth that has been unearthed. An environmental official remarked to me recently that “in Providence, everything is contaminated.” So what then?

As a descendent of settlers, I resist the urge to start over, whether here or beyond some horizon. To either see the urban environment as a ruins to be escaped or a set of problems in need of grand solutions. I resonate with the call to what Deborah Bird Rose calls “slow work, “not only in the sense of taking time, slowing down, and doing things carefully, but also in the sense of living in the present temporalities, localities, and relationalities of our actual lives.” In the face of all these earthly troubles, it’s already too late and yet never too late to land.

- Samia Cohen

Eco action invitation

When passing over a body of water, slow your pace just a little. Take out your headphones, lift your eyes or close them. Breathe deeply, bring your awareness to your heart. Say a word or two of thanks.