

Carry on, Carry On!

River Reckoning with Miriam Love and the Thames River Rally

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOS BY KERRY MANDERS

Miriam Love enseigne dans le département d'anglais au King's College de l'Université Western. Elle est la cofondatrice du Rallye de la rivière Thames (TRR) à London, Ontario. La rivière Thames dont les embranchements dessinent la géographie de London, coule dans le cœur de la ville et traverse 40 kilomètres de sentiers pédestres et de parcs. TRR avec ses bénévoles procède au nettoyage mensuel saisonnier, chaque groupe nettoie une section en particulier, les berges, sous les ponts et même dans l'eau! Les membres du TRR agissent avec la conviction qu'une rivière en santé assure la vie d'une communauté forte.

Miriam Love, who teaches in the English Department at King's College, Western University, is the co-founder of Thames River Rally (TRR) in London, Ontario. The Thames River, whose forks comprise a defining geographical feature of the city, flows through the heart of London and through almost forty kilometers of its riverside pathways and parks. Established in 2012, Thames River Rally (www.thamesriverrally.ca) organizes volunteers for monthly clean-ups during spring, summer, and fall; each

rally targets one main area—on the banks, under the bridges, in the parks, and sometimes in the water itself—in need of attention. TRR provides its volunteers (who are recruited via social media, community meetings, and old-fashioned word-of-mouth buzz) with gloves, garbage pickers, garbage bags, and safety instructions; together, volunteers become citizen stewards who, in coordination with the City of London, remove tonnes of garbage from the river and its surrounding green spaces. TRR has also partnered with neighbourhood associations and London CARES (Community Addiction Response Strategy) to have permanent needle bins installed along the Thames.

TRR's motto, "Healthy River, Strong Community," encapsulates their conviction that the health and vitality of the Thames River is inextricably connected to the health and vitality of the city through which it runs.

I visited Miriam Love multiple times during the summer of 2014; by then, TRR had earned a Western University Green Award for their contribution to sustainability and education on campus; moreover,

their contributions were about to be recognized by the Mayor of London as part of City Council's Featured Community Organization program. Love and her TRR co-founder, Tom Cull, took me on private tours of the river; they also invited me to come and get my hands dirty at their June 2014 clean-up. The following is edited from a series of conversations, both in-person and virtual, with Love.

*River of the thousand-and-one-nights
of sky, of stars
sailing down to the clay banks,
sticking there—
a kind of ink, a muddy lubrication,
a kind of
getting under the skin.
—Cornelia Hoogland, "Names
of the River"*

KM: *Can you tell me about your initial encounters with—and impressions of—the Thames River?*

ML: Since moving to London eight years ago, I've made a lot of use—daily use—of the bike trail that runs along the river. Because of those daily

encounters with the river, I noticed and cared about its life—human and non-human. When I met Tom Cull, we took many walks along the Thames, and I started to appreciate it even more as an animal and plant habitat, as a soothing presence—and, at the same time, as a dirty, sometimes pretty odoriferous, and forgotten life force.

as a rather private endeavour into a public operation. How did you begin to involve the London community and to organize yourselves more officially as Thames River Rally?

ML: We put out a call for anyone to join us as we headed down with garbage pinchers and bags to practice paying attention, to perhaps bring

all the carts are. The carts become home to the toads, or maybe the toads become home to the carts? And, evidently, tires used to be put into the river quite intentionally, to provide fish and snake habitat. On the other hand, we see a lot of stuff that is toxic—printers, electrical parts—and the animals we see live despite—not with—this junk.

I remember one time when we encountered a huge cache of needles, human feces, and lots of other garbage under a bridge.... I think that was the first time that I saw the river, not just as a dumpsite or a disregarded force, but also as a site of wandering and personal devastation.

KM: *How did you move from recreation—from bike rides and walks—to work? From looking at and thinking about the river to touching and changing it?*

ML: Tom and I joined together to start informal river clean-ups and to think about what the river means to us, to the city, and to the community. In the early months, it would just be Tom and me—and maybe my son. These quieter experiences have their own value: I remember one such time, when we encountered a huge cache of needles, human feces, and lots of other garbage under a bridge. It was raining, and neither Tom nor I uttered a word: we were so overwhelmed by the devastation—environmental, social, and so individual—of which we were seeing just the traces. I think that was the first time that I saw the river, not just as a dumpsite or a disregarded force, but also as a site of wandering and personal devastation. And it was with these two things—the disregard, the devastation—that the social and the environmental became so interlinked for me.

KM: *You and Tom made what began*

back to life this “strong river god” (and, in the practice, perhaps awaken ourselves as well). At our first clean-up, a friend joined in; now, we often have several volunteers for clean-ups. We wanted a name for the event, and liked the public, political, social, and purpose-driven connotations of “Rally.”

KM: *On our walks, I was struck by the juxtaposition of organic and non-organic material, the living and non-living “stuff,” along and in the river.*

ML: There is a lot of life teeming out of and through the non-organic: for example, on the first walk we took together, we saw nearly submerged (whether in sand or water) shopping carts, which could well provide shelter or mating/nesting grounds for some of the river’s creatures. The abandoned carts have become almost a sculptural part of the environment—they are an example of the kinds of human waste that will never decompose and that, over time, become a part of the river landscape. Various creatures live and move in and among the waste—for example, that toad you photographed where

KM: *In terms of creatures, there are the usual suspects (I’m thinking squirrels, chipmunks, and the like), but what other species have you met at the Thames?*

ML: Besides the many geese and ducks, we have seen mink, beavers, spiny soft shell turtles, longnose gar, and so many (invasive) carp. One thing about many of the river animals is that they are not “cute” or big-eyed and cuddly. A fish doesn’t look back at you in a heart-melting way; and yet, even in that fishy face, there is an invitation—maybe a demand—that we pay attention to the worlds around us, to the ways that rivers and lakes and oceans are connected and present.

KM: *How do you go about the business of cleaning up without disrupting animal habitats?*

ML: It’s a matter of paying attention and being curious, of asking questions to biologists when we need to. The Upper Thames Conservation Authority informs us about at-risk populations, about protected and potentially sensitive areas. Garbage pick-up is most needed in heavy (human) usage areas—already well-



trod areas—close to paths and such. Most often, then, we’re sure not to disturb nesting grounds or other sensitive areas.

KM: *Speaking of heavy human usage, can you tell me about the various humans you encounter? I’m thinking, for example, of the homeless man under Carfrae Bridge whose only possessions, perhaps, are what we think of as garbage.*

ML: Yes: we are aware of populations that the river sustains *within it* but also of the human lives without it—on its banks. I have to think of the people we encounter and what the river means to them. We encounter them in what we think of as public property but which to them is a kind of private space. We want to respect their privacy and to acknowledge that the river is their home. They *live* there, we just visit.

KM: *And they leave traces other than garbage, yes? I took a lot of graffiti photos on our walks. What else do you see?*

ML: Notes, jackets, placards of remembrance—there is one by Blackfriar’s Bridge—tell stories of crisis, of despair, and of death: the river also shoulders those failures of hope.

KM: *Speaking of failure, you and I have talked about the failure of understanding, which is a kind of success—the recognition that there are things we do not and cannot understand or grasp. This recognition is as vital as it is humbling, I think.*

ML: Yes, I think our relationship to the river, to others, is often a practice, not of understanding but of *standing under*—as Cary Wolfe articulates it; a way to open our ways of approaching and paying attention to what is other. Wolfe suggests that we might become aware of and “vulnerable to other knowledges.” It seems important to both understand the river—its history, its diversity, its health—and to listen to it, to remain open to it in some way.

KM: *Remaining open to the river and to the others; as you say, you visit the river, while others live there. How do you deal with that difference?*

ML: We come across people passed out or sleeping on the river’s multi-use path, for example. Should we approach and converse with them or leave them alone? Make eye contact or ignore? What is more respectful? Should I offer help if I think someone is in trouble? Am I comfortable—and safe—helping? What does “help” entail? There can be a question of—a legitimate concern about—the safety of women in this environment. There are places and times that I don’t feel safe walking alone. This has been part of the learning process, and we know now about other organizations and what they do. If I’m scared that someone on a bike might run over that person passed out on the trail, I know now about community outreach services such as London CARES that offer support to those “living rough” or in crisis.



KM: *And what about the people who use the river for sport?*

ML: On our walk, it struck me that men live on the river banks, not women, and also that it was all men that we saw fishing and/or drinking along the banks. It's a place that men gather—it tends to be a pretty male space. At the same time, every person *on* the river—canoeing, rowing—was female. What of that?!

KM: *What of gender divisions within the Thames River Rally?*

ML: I am often the only woman at the rallies, and I'm often the only person who brings my child with me. I have had parents tell me that they would never bring their children, that it is not safe: but this is changing. As we reach more of the community, a broader spectrum of people, including women and children, have joined us at the rallies, which is great.



KM: *Do you see any special relationship between or concern for women and the river? What connection do you see between feminism and the work that you do?*

ML: I think that our work is aligned with feminist politics: for one, its vision is sensitive to—and expands from—various (and often “other”) perspectives. Secondly, it is an everyday practice and engagement that opens a new “point of entry,” as sociologist Dorothy Smith might say, into new knowledges, frameworks, and ways of thinking about ourselves, our environments, our neighbours, and our cities anew. In my mind, this attention to various perspectives and to the possibilities of everyday practices makes our work feminist practice.



KM: *Part of this “everyday practice” entails encountering death. On our*



walk, we saw a recently drowned raccoon; you showed me an aged fish carcass. I'm interested in those remains and what remains.

ML: Yes, I think the river speaks of death—like any good river poem speaks of death, right? On life and death, one of the river poems I think of, inevitably, is “The Dry Salvages” from T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*:

I do not know much about gods;
but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god—sullen,
untamed and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first
recognised as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a
conveyor of commerce;
Then only a problem confront-
ing the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the
brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in cities—ever,
however, implacable.
Keeping his seasons and rages,
destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget.
Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine,
but waiting, watching and
waiting.



KM: *Eliot imagines a river that watches us forgetting.*

ML: We see the river as subject and object—and more important, as *verb*, here—as a kind of force, of time itself. I think life and death are here: crisis and disaster and forgetting and the regulated time of commerce. Each of these ways of marking or experiencing time is, in a Freudian sense, reality: life and death drives, in the sense of both cohering and keeping stable and at the same time threatening (or promising!) to break apart what we think we know...

KM: *...threatening and promising*



something beyond the fathomable, perhaps.

ML: I also think of Tom's extraordinary (as yet unpublished) poem, "Full Fathom Five," and the multiple ways that death and life are figured and transfigured and swim together in various forms: discarded vacuums transforming into fish, fish into bones, fins into hands into time, which wash further down the river, which itself becomes another river. In this last stanza, the poem focuses on the continual transformation of river, life, and objects. Here, a Shark vacuum,

after being lured by and swimming with a shoal of hammerhead sharks, sinks into the river mud only to be prodded by another promise of life, movement, transformation:

She comes to rest below a damn
ten thousand years old
and yet to be built. On a river yet
to be named, by another name.
She returns to the place she
never left.

Settling in, one remaining ruby
encrusted on her nose, she sinks
into the muck, winking at the
crayfish

*It is here, she thinks
as the belly of something soft as
a sponge nuzzles up
extending a fin that feels like
fingers.*

In one way, the river speaks of death very directly—of animal deaths, of decay, of these carcasses—but also of the death that shadows a bottom-line, stuff-obsessed society in the form of human disregard for "others," human and non-human. I think both of the poems I mention take up the seriousness of death which shadows our commerce-driven rationality.

KM: *And yet—*

ML: And yet, in another register, the river drives the settlement of cities, and now offers a chance—as is being discussed here in London—for re-vitalization, for new life. These are important momentums for us to follow and think about.

KM: *They are important momentums that, as you mentioned, you are including your son in. What does it mean to involve him in a social movement, a political activity?*

ML: It is an engagement. An embodied, everyday practice, and not simply an idea, or a slogan or t-shirt: it's an activity that helps to structure our time and our interrelationship with our city and our river. For my son, it is about "caring" about the river—he's picked up that language. But it's also about joy: the joy in working together and in paying enough attention to another lifeworld—that of the river—that it becomes another home, familiar and strange.

KM: *How do you approach potential dangers of the work with your son? Of working near water, near people he doesn't know. And there are, as you mentioned, a lot of used needles to clean up.*



ML: I think that there is the danger of this first, immediate exposure: to the current, to needles, to possibly mentally ill individuals living on the riverbanks. But more than this, I think, there is the danger that looms ahead—and presently—if we do nothing. Not to ring apocalyptic, and, even ringing the bell, not to say that we can do much about the damage that we've done; but a further looking away from, instead of back at, the world we inhabit and the damage we've done and do, seems to me another kind of violence and danger. I'm okay with introducing these immediate dangers and ways to work with them. It seems to me it is a way of maybe not warding off a larger violence but of reckoning with it.

KM: *Looking back at, rather than away from, our environment is a really great way to put it.*

ML: Related to this looking back and behind, I think, is what we were saying

about the connectedness of rivers to lakes and oceans—this immanence and connectedness of being—which to me has been felt anew, even in the act of breaking apart a plastic six-pack binding. Again, dealing with the immediate dangers of the river, especially for my son, I hope will make him make connections between rivers and all waterways and the environments and lifeworlds we live with and in. Because of this quotidian experience, the abyss, the strangeness, and the likewise-disregarded life of the ocean and its depths can become more apparent to us. The strangeness—the distance and vastness of the sea—is at once exaggerated and lessened, made uncanny, when I pick up trash, which is no longer headed for other waterways, or a huge garbage flotilla. Un-canny.

KM: *It seems to me that you are prioritizing practice over theory, or putting practice before theory. But maybe those are false dichotomies?*

ML: I think practice, more than rhetoric, is a way of paying attention and becoming attuned to the river and to its many lifeworlds. I think of spiritual practices which are exactly that: practices in which one takes comfort perhaps, but which also, in repetition, amount to a faith, a fidelity, and a way of paying attention. And also: I think that we at the Thames River Rally are sort of a rag-tag bunch, or at least that we started as such, and that our only certainty was the practice—and not a sign, not a singular “event,” not a t-shirt, not an emblazoned water bottle. It is a different way for my son to respond to and be a part of his environment. It is perhaps instead of his learning about “environmentalism” (as I am sure he will, and I am glad for it), which of course has been co-opted in so many ways and is its own niche market.

KM: *Your work with the Thames River Rally is, for me, refreshing in this era of clicktivism, of hashtag activism, when*

all it takes for some people to feel socially and politically active is to hit “like” or “share” on the cause of the day, virtually.

ML: To reflect more directly on theory and practice: insofar as these two things can (or ought to) be thought of separately, I think that we value both of these ways of engaging with the river and the work that we do. Our practice is reflective and opportunistic in one of the ways that theory allows a practice to be so: that is, for me, theory is about reaching out horizontally as well as vertically, stepping in and stepping back, and twisting together roots or paths to see what might come next. In one way, the practice of cleaning up the river is very straightforward and goal-oriented; and while this “simple” practice is meaningful in itself, it is also a wading in to something we do not know: as I have said before—a way of responding to the river in one determined and direct way, but in a lot of *unexpected* ways as well. These unexpected paths are the encounters we have with various others, the slowing down of time as one focuses on the terrain and the clip-clip of garbage pinchers; they are the opportunities to learn about the river—now that we are becoming a recognised group—from a variety of (theoretical) perspectives—political, social, ecological, historical.

KM: *You are out there each month, literally on the ground as garbage is repeatedly tossed on the banks and in the river. Obviously, there is no point at which you’re done. How do you reckon with the unendingness of your river clean-ups?*

ML: Tom and I have often had conversations about why we do this. There is, of course, more garbage in some places we’ve cleaned when we return a few weeks later. I have thought about Georg Lukacs and the

almost-divine irony of the novelist, who posits a world and its foundations, who believes and sets out a world, even when that world has no objectivity, no foundations. The power of irony for Lukacs is that this dramatic casting can indeed create a world, a foundation-less foundation. And I’ve always thought that this is a way of saying: Carry on, *Carry on!* Because there is so little certainly in what we do: I mean, does it really make a difference? Sure we get loads of garbage out, but only until more comes. Still, I think we feel even more grounded, then, in repeating, “carry on!” And this “ironic” position, as you might imagine, is a difficult one to hold, especially as very well-meaning and socially-minded individuals want numbers—pounds lifted out, numbers of needles collected—because this “proof,” this certainty, is what can drive social policy.

KM: *Thames River Rally is offering some of this proof now, yes? I’m thinking about the needle bins that London CARES picks up, the quantifiable bags of garbage that the city takes away after a rally. Are you a force in the city’s social policy, now that you are in your third season?*

ML: Not directly; not yet. But at the same time, we are citizens in action, and various public groups have been interested in our volunteer efforts. And, as we learn more about the various groups, we learn more about the policies, missions, and concerns that shape and direct a relationship to the river and the local environment. Right now, London is involved in initiatives to re-imagine the river’s relationship to the city, and it is exciting to be involved in a project that seems to be timely, in that it overlaps with the work that many public groups, as well as London itself, are doing.

KM: *Thank you for the generosity you’ve shown, not only by talking with me, but*

by re-introducing me to the Thames River—near which I was born—and by inviting me to be part of your rallies.

ML: I want to thank you, too, for your many questions to me about the river and our work. I’ve been thinking about our talk—and also about the very fact of our talk—how care is something that opens a thoughtfulness, a new current of friendship, and of thinking, of an invitation for those things. To say it plainly: thanks for your willingness to walk and talk the river.

Kerry Manders is a writer and photographer whose work examines gender, memory, and mourning. She currently teaches in the Department of English at York University, Toronto, and her essays have appeared in Latch, Media Tropes, Magenta Magazine, C Magazine, and The New York Times.

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