

# *Invitations to Listen*

Rachel Epp Buller



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### Listening, Walking, Healing: Rachel Epp Buller's Art of Care

*Invitations to Listen* offers a series of contemplative encounters. Viewers are surrounded by ghostly images of snow-laden trees, monumental and totemic. Booklets made of accordion-folded papers, each dyed with evocative washes of color, hang in space. Texts in works throughout the exhibition exhort us to reflect on our connections with each other, with our own bodies, and with the natural world.

Rachel Epp Buller's art encourages us to slow down and take a deep breath. It proposes a mode of being in the world in which we ground ourselves in the present moment by using the full suite of our senses to attune our bodies to what surrounds us. More broadly, her art suggests that intentional, careful, embodied listening can be a tool in healing the various ruptures we experience in current daily living.

#### Walking and Listening

The bodies of work in *Invitations to Listen* spring from a 2022 fellowship Buller completed as the Fulbright Canada Research Chair in Arts, Humanities, and Culture at the University of Alberta. She filled her days with creating art, collaborating with other thinkers and artists, and getting to know the place in which she found herself for four months. Daily

walks were a crucial part of this process. Some days, she walked along the North Saskatchewan River; others, she walked in neighborhoods. Sometimes she walked with other people, and sometimes she walked alone. Always, she listened.

Contemporary art practices like Buller's expand the notion of listening. For Buller, listening is more than receiving and interpreting auditory stimuli. It goes beyond her ears to include her feet, her eyes, her nose. She strives for an attitude of listening that is deliberate, attentive, and full of care so that it becomes an experience of full-body connection to the place in which she walks. It is a matter of taking notice of singular details, of being open and sensitive to the nuances of sensory phenomena.

Her work encompasses the many modes of perceptual stimuli that she encounters on her walks. In Alberta, for instance, she often listened to water. She heard and felt snow sliding and compacting underfoot; ice scraping, cracking, and shifting; water dripping and rushing in the river valley. She sensed the sting of the icy air and the rhythmic steam of her own breathing. She listened to coyotes yipping, snowshoe hares darting, dogs barking, magpies chattering. She observed the ever-present trees, which she came to think of as companions on her listening walks.

Time and repetition were constitutive parts of her experience. She often traveled the same paths, carving an invisible groove into the landscape that deepened as she repeated her walks. She became aware of recurrent phenomena—animals that became active at certain times of the day, people who walked their dogs on a set schedule, and always the unmoving trees, which grew increasingly particular as they became known to her. As she came to know the land through her repeated walks, she also noticed the ways it changed over time. The quality of the sunlight transformed as winter shifted into spring; grass made an appearance; animals replaced other animals as their daily and seasonal rhythms changed.

Walking is an activity that is common to most people. Artist Ernesto Pujol remarked, “*We walk. No one taught us how. . . Walking erect was one of the gestures and experiences that made us human.*”<sup>1</sup> We also share this form of mobility with many non-human beings. Geographer Doreen Massey noted that when we walk, we join in the mobile processes of the non-human world in which continents, seas, animals, birds, and plants are all migrating and moving in small- and large-scale ways.<sup>2</sup> This view creates a vision of a vast, earthly network of mobility dynamics of which humans are just one part. We join a larger whole that erodes the boundaries between humans, animals, plants, land forms, and bodies of water.

Walking has had an increasingly prominent place as an artistic medium since the mid-twentieth century, which saw the dematerialization of the object in the art world and increased focus on bodily and spatial

practices. Walking as an art form has a broad range of iterations, from solitary walks in remote locations to complex performances. Unlike some other walking artists, Buller does not structure her walks as a participatory performance, nor does she generally use them as a means for gathering physical material with which to make art objects. Her work aligns with that of artists like Emma Bush and Richard Long, for whom walking is a way of being in and carefully enmeshing with a place.

As Buller walks, exercising full-body attunement, she is creating. Her listening walks become the raw materials for works that she creates later in her studio, but they are also a form of artmaking on their own. During her walks, she is practicing embodied perception. She enacts a sense of co-extensivity with her environment, recalling French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s idea that human perception is mediated through our bodily intertwining with the world. Her prints, sound works, and installations aspire to evoke her experience of physically and mentally intertwining with her surroundings during her listening walks. They encourage viewers to imagine the experience, and invite them to recreate it for themselves.

#### Health and Care

Presented in conjunction with Washburn University’s 2023 WUmeister theme of health and healing, *Invitations to Listen* offers an entry point for thinking about multiple dimensions of health, including physiological wellbeing. The mental and physical benefits of mindful movement like Buller’s attentive walking practice are borne out in eons of cultural

traditions. In Theravada Buddhism, for instance, monks have engaged in mindful daily walks combined with Vipassana meditation for centuries.<sup>3</sup> Recent scientific research corroborates traditional cultural knowledge, amply demonstrating the health benefits of combining mindfulness with gentle movement. Current studies indicate that mindful walking can have powerful stress reduction effects across demographics,<sup>4</sup> and new research shows that it has particular benefits for people with health concerns. A 2021 study, for instance, found that a mindful walking practice increased the exercise capacity of patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, improved their symptoms, and reduced their health risks.<sup>5</sup> Other studies from the past few years have found similarly positive results for patients with breast cancer<sup>6</sup> and diabetes mellitus.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to physiological health, Buller's practice invites a broader conception of health and healing through its ethics of care. Care has become a prominent topic in current discourse about our social and economic structures, in part because the global COVID-19 pandemic highlighted both the essential role and the highly undervalued labor of the care economy. Care can be thought of as the activities that nurture individuals and sustain our bonds, as well as the things we do to maintain and repair our world.<sup>8</sup> It is the deeply necessary work of cultivating, supporting, and growing relationships of all kinds.

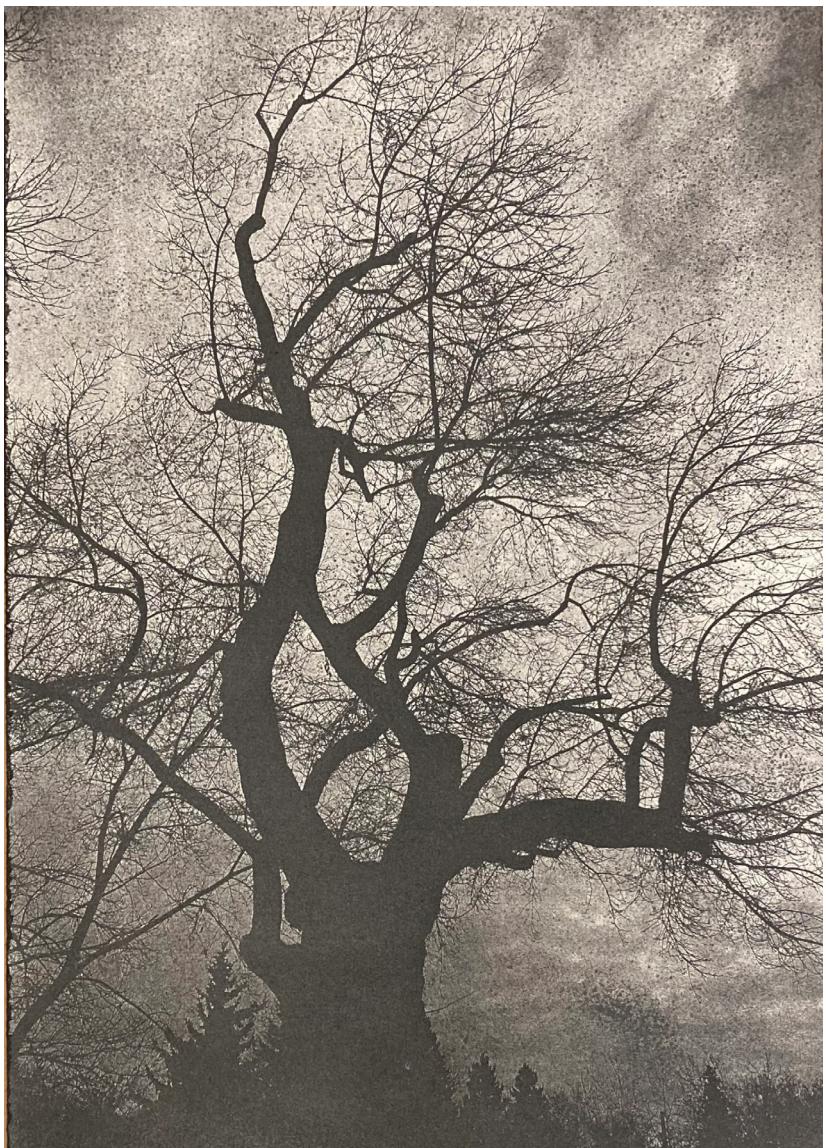
For Buller, listening is, above all, a means of creating and caring for relationships. Her art posits that listening, particularly

full-bodied listening, is an act of care—self-care, yes, but also care for other people and for the world. Her care-full practice feels particularly timely now, when many of us are considering how to heal not just our bodies and minds, but our inequitable societal and economic structures, our relationships with each other, and humanity's connection to the natural world. Listening, attuning, "*using the whole body as an echo chamber for timbre to resonate*"<sup>9</sup>—this is a path to the care and connection that could help heal some of the schisms we experience.

—Sara Stepp, Academic Curator

#### Endnotes

- 1 Ernesto Pujol, *Walking Art Practice: Reflections on Socially Engaged Paths* (Charmouth, UK: Triarchy Press, 2018), 1.
- 2 Harriet Tarlo and Judith Tucker, "Off Path, Counter Path: Contemporary Walking Collaborations in Landscape, Art and Poetry," *Critical Survey* 29, no. 1 (2017): 121.
- 3 Boreth Ly, "Buddhist Walking Meditations and Contemporary Art of Southeast Asia," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 20, no. 1 (February 2012): 274-275.
- 4 Marcelo Bigliassi et al, "Effects of Mindfulness on Psychological and Psychophysiological Responses During SelfPaced Walking," *Psychophysiology* 57, no. 4 (April 2020): e13529. See also Michael Teut et al, "Effectiveness of a Mindfulness-Based Walking Programme in Reducing Symptoms of Stress—A Randomised Controlled Trial", *European Journal of Integrative Medicine* 4 (September 2012): 78.
- 5 Feng-Lien Lin and Mei-Ling Yeh, "Walking and Mindfulness Improve the Exercise Capacity of Patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease: A Randomised Controlled Trial," *Clinical Rehabilitation* 35, no. 8 (August 2021): 1117-1125.
- 6 Maren Luise Schroeder et al, "Feasibility and Possible Effects of Mindful Walking and Moderate Walking in Breast Cancer Survivors: A Randomized Controlled Pilot Study with a Nested Qualitative Study Part," *Integrative Cancer Therapies* 21 (2022): 15347354211066067.
- 7 Hee Young Jung et al, "Comparison of the Effects of Korean Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Walking, and Patient Education in Diabetes Mellitus," *Nursing & Health Sciences* 17, no. 4 (December 2015): 516-525.
- 8 Jacqueline Millner and Gretchen Coombs, "Introduction: Care Ethics and Art," in *Care Ethics and Art*, eds. Jacqueline Millner and Gretchen Coombs (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 1.
- 9 Anthony Gritten, "Resonant Listening," *Performance Research* 15, no. 3 (2010): 119.



*Listening with Trees 4*, 2022  
laser engraved graphite

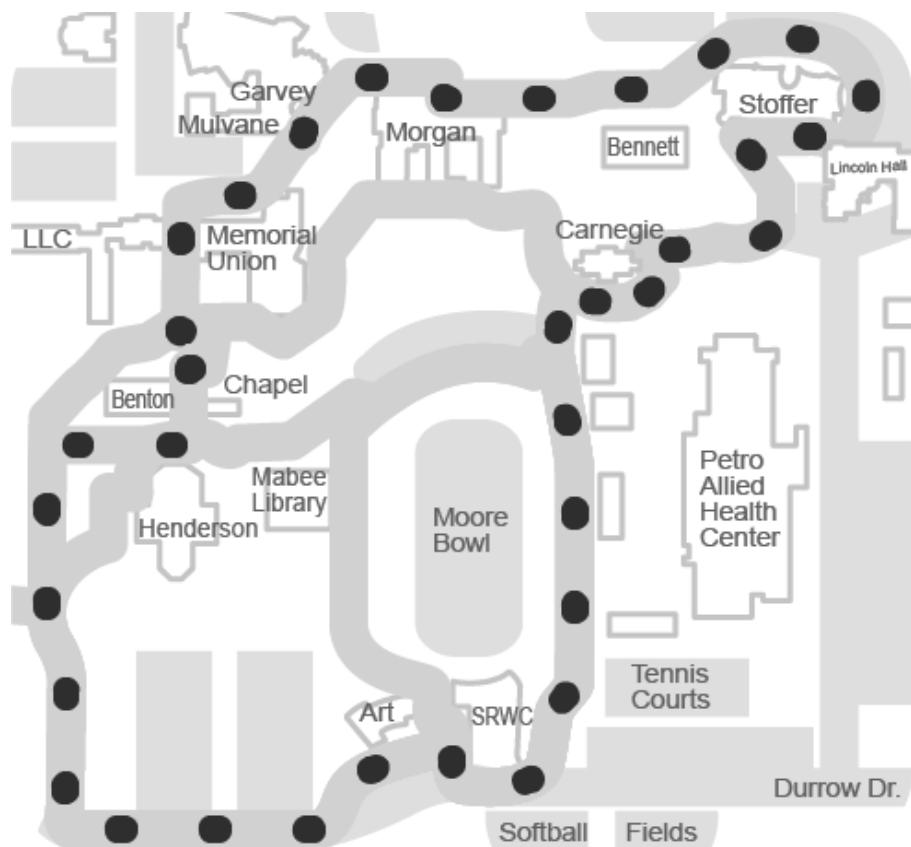
wait with ice  
think with trees  
walk through snow



*Listening with Trees 2*, 2022  
laser engraved graphite



Walk and Listen; follow the walking map below and look for signs featuring photographic images by Rachel Epp Buller. Scan the QR code anywhere along the path marked by these signs to listen to Buller's sound performance *Winter Walking*.





*One Hundred Days of Walking*, watercolor on paper, 2022 (detail)  
watercolor on paper, braided cotton, vinyl



Installation view - *One Hundred Days of Walking*, 2022  
watercolor on paper, braided cotton, vinyl

# ARTIST STATEMENT

*How do we listen?*

*To whom do we listen?*

*Why should we listen?*

*This time of converging crises calls us to listen differently.*

Through a series of artistic inquiries, I propose that listening is not just an action but a reciprocal orientation. Good listening, relational listening, or what Salomé Voegelin calls “*carefull listening*,” is a listening toward engagement, a furthering of connection with human and more-than-human relations. We must predispose ourselves to a relational listening orientation through our actions, our gestures, our mindsets.

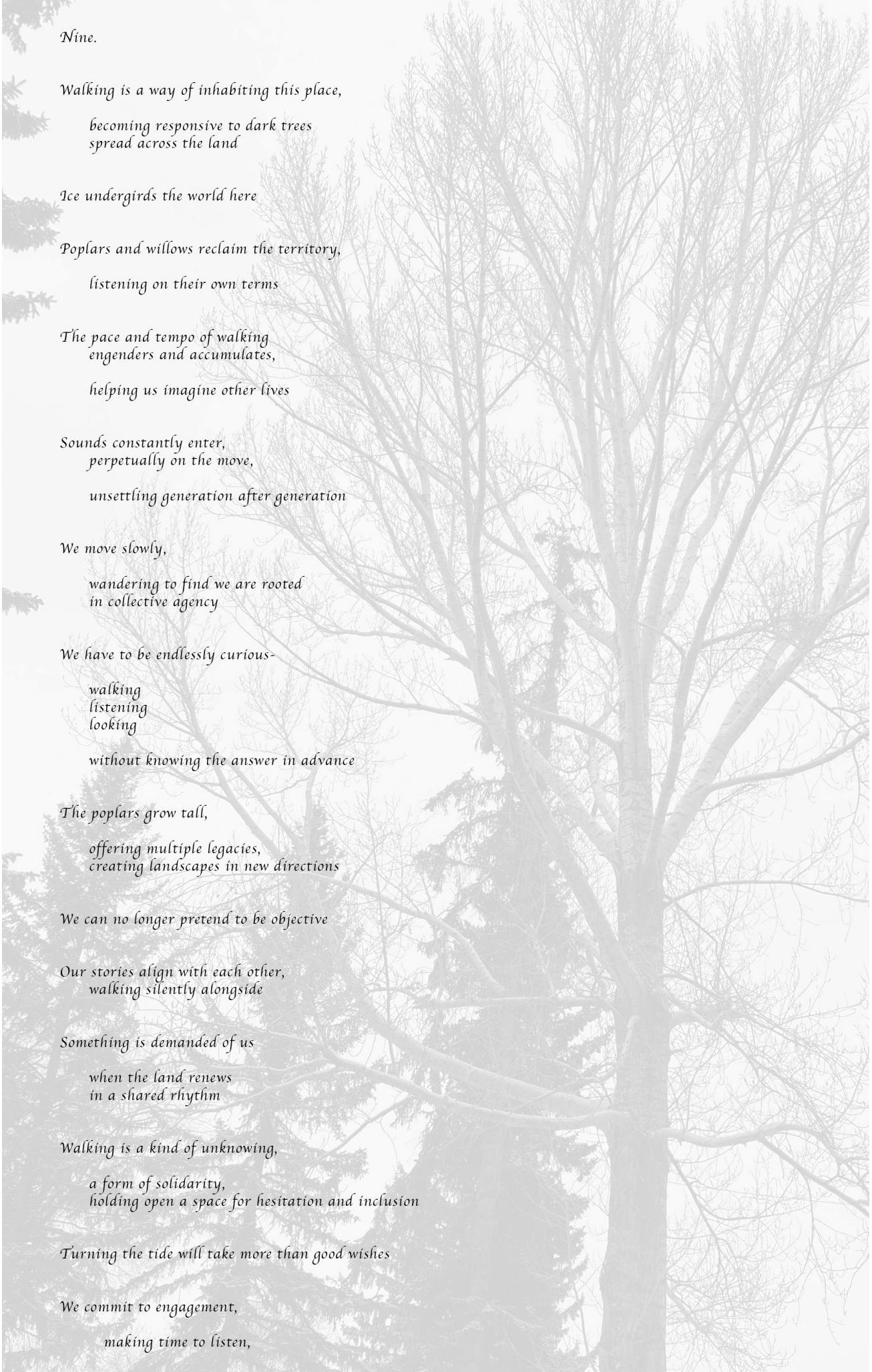
But in our current world, listening toward relationships is not always easily done. Listening to build relation requires attention, and intention, over sustained periods. Indigenous education scholar Dwayne Donald argues that humans are in an era of “relationship denial” and that we need to repair these relations, with each other and with the land, and renew these relationships on kinship terms. Donald regularly leads listening walks in the North Saskatchewan River Valley and he asserts that, “*By walking and listening, people begin to perceive*

*the life around themselves differently. They feel enmeshed in relationships. [ . . . ] They walk themselves into kinship relationality*” (2021).

My artistic research takes this claim seriously. In my performance practice, I explore ways that listening can be carried out not just with our ears but with the whole body—hearing, sensing, perceiving—and how specific artistic practices and gestures enact and facilitate forms of reparative and relational listening. In this exhibition, I hope to offer entry points into a listening orientation: objects and texts produced as a result of daily walking and listening encounters, and a variety of slow, durational artistic practices that embody modes of listening engagement. I hope that visitors will take the works on display as invitations to listen, and to keep listening.

—Rachel Epp Buller

Image right: *Winter Walking 9, 2022*  
digital print



Nine.

*Walking is a way of inhabiting this place,  
becoming responsive to dark trees  
spread across the land*

*Ice undergirds the world here*

*Poplars and willows reclaim the territory,  
listening on their own terms*

*The pace and tempo of walking  
engenders and accumulates,  
helping us imagine other lives*

*Sounds constantly enter,  
perpetually on the move,  
unsettling generation after generation*

*We move slowly,  
wandering to find we are rooted  
in collective agency*

*We have to be endlessly curious-  
walking  
listening  
looking  
without knowing the answer in advance*

*The poplars grow tall,  
offering multiple legacies,  
creating landscapes in new directions*

*We can no longer pretend to be objective*

*Our stories align with each other,  
walking silently alongside*

*Something is demanded of us  
when the land renews  
in a shared rhythm*

*Walking is a kind of unknowing,  
a form of solidarity,  
holding open a space for hesitation and inclusion*

*Turning the tide will take more than good wishes*

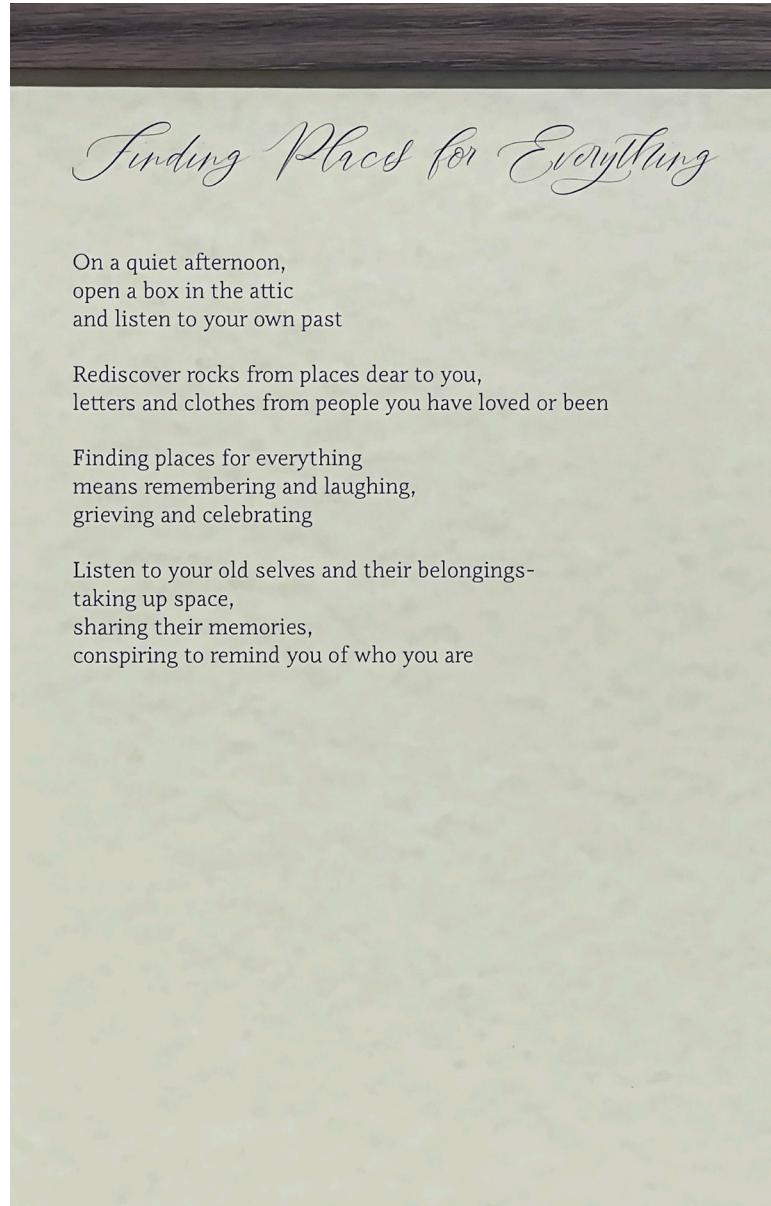
*We commit to engagement,  
making time to listen,*

*mixing dissonant sounds  
waiting for surprising juxtapositions  
catching glimpses of what could happen*



Installation view left —  
*September Scores: Invitations to Listen*, 2022  
digital prints and audio

Detail below —  
*September Scores: Invitations to Listen, Finding Places for Everything*, 2022  
digital print



# walking looking listening

## WUmester 2023 | Health & Healing

*Invitations to Listen* is presented in conjunction with WUmester, an annual university-wide conversation on a topic that changes each spring semester. WUmester 2023 examines health and healing from the perspectives of academic disciplines across campus and through a variety of co-curricular programming.

The words "health" and "healing" are both derived from the Old English word "hale," meaning "wholeness, being whole, sound, or well." But while health is a state or goal, healing is a process; healing invites us to take action. And although healing is often associated with "cure," a restoration of health, it is actually considerably broader than this. Healing can be an intensely private, subjective experience that varies by culture, time, place, and person. Healing may occur when a chronically ill person dies at home surrounded by family and friends, or when two people talk out their differences. Commemorating a historic injustice can help heal, as can naming a once-mysterious medical condition. Devouring junk food and laughing on the couch with your best friend may not be healthy, but it sure can be healing.

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