

Corona Walker

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How to do a Corona Walk

Sidestep any sentimentality. Walk with others. Don't talk too much; allow for silence. Be playful, and welcome surprises. Move towards what is unknown. Embody all of it, falling sideways into the bog.

Corona Isabel Walker was born in March 1870 in Dartmouth Nova Scotia. She died and was buried in a local cemetery in January 1889. I first noticed her headstone 30 years ago, when I moved to the area; the tragedy of her early demise caught my attention as did her name. When I began making artworks in the form of walks, her name became even more resonant. Her headstone was broken at that time, with the top part lying on the grass, but the image of a young woman wearing a crown and walking always came to mind whenever I passed by.

Corona's headstone has been repaired and is now the inspiration for an interdisciplinary walking project that traces the invisible features of her existence in late nineteenth century Nova Scotia, and simultaneously maps my wanderings during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

I soon realized that there were virtually no records or documents about Corona Walker; school ledgers, church records and registrations of deaths for that period had been destroyed in fires, and, in some cases, not been kept at all. Archive and museum visits yielded only her birth registration and several census listings for her family, along with a very short death notice in the Halifax Morning Herald newspaper, and one mention of her funeral in the diary of Reginald Walker (no relation), a local teenager.

In each record, her name is spelled differently:

Cronia
becomes Cora
becomes Corona

The last name is from her cemetery marker, *Corona Isabel Walker*, literally written in stone.



Headstone for Corona Walker in Dartmouth Public Cemetery

In my project, she may be Crone, Crony, or Cory, a shifting and multiple subject located in many places and temporalities.

Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves?

From *Street Haunting: A London Adventure*, Virginia Woolf, 1930¹

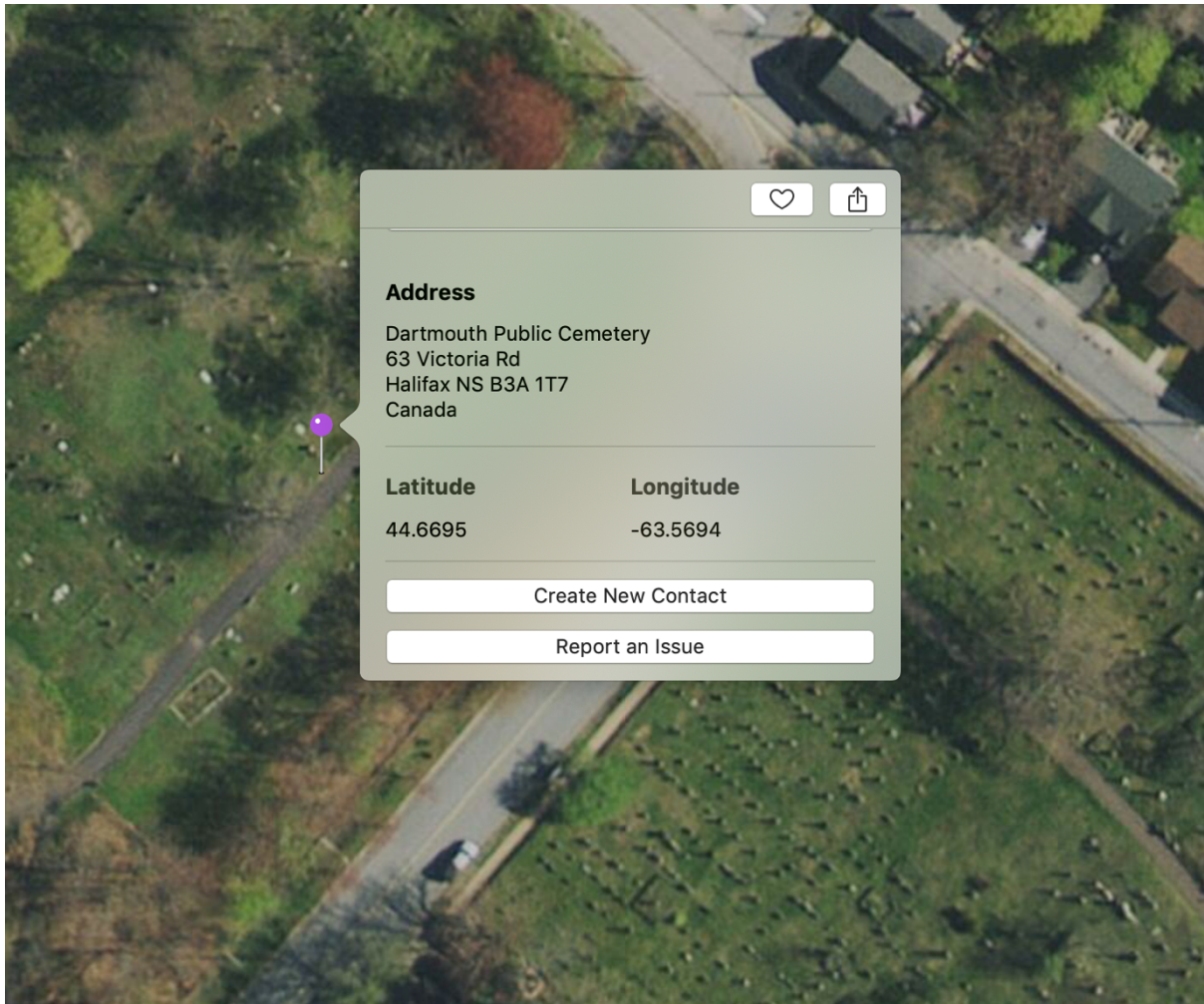
This notion of a “true self” that is multiple, dynamic and shifting, brings my account of Corona Walker into the realm of speculative biography. It is precariously positioned within the gaps of what is known and accepted as truth. Paraphrasing Donna Lee Brien, researcher and writer on non-fiction genres, speculative fiction uses conjecture and imagination to occupy the biases and gaps in the archival record, in particular concerning those who are underrepresented.²

This walking project is a speculative invention about an almost invisible or absent subject – a memento mori about Corona Walker’s mortality, mine, ours. It willfully engages maudlin or melodramatic experiences, but is really about the mundane: the weather; errands that can be construed as excuses to be outdoors; how to retrace the routes between the school, the shipyard, the canal and duck pond. Will I know if I am I following Corona’s path? From time to time, I consult old photographs and maps, laying the contemporary street grid over a city atlas from 1878, recalling the montaged image in my head as I walk. My feet and my imagination move through faintly discerned changes, resemblances, and vestiges.

If Corona Walker had gone out to buy a pencil, as Virginia Woolf did, where might she have wandered, and can I visit those places on foot now?



Detail from Hopkin's 1878 City Atlas of Dartmouth (NS Archives)

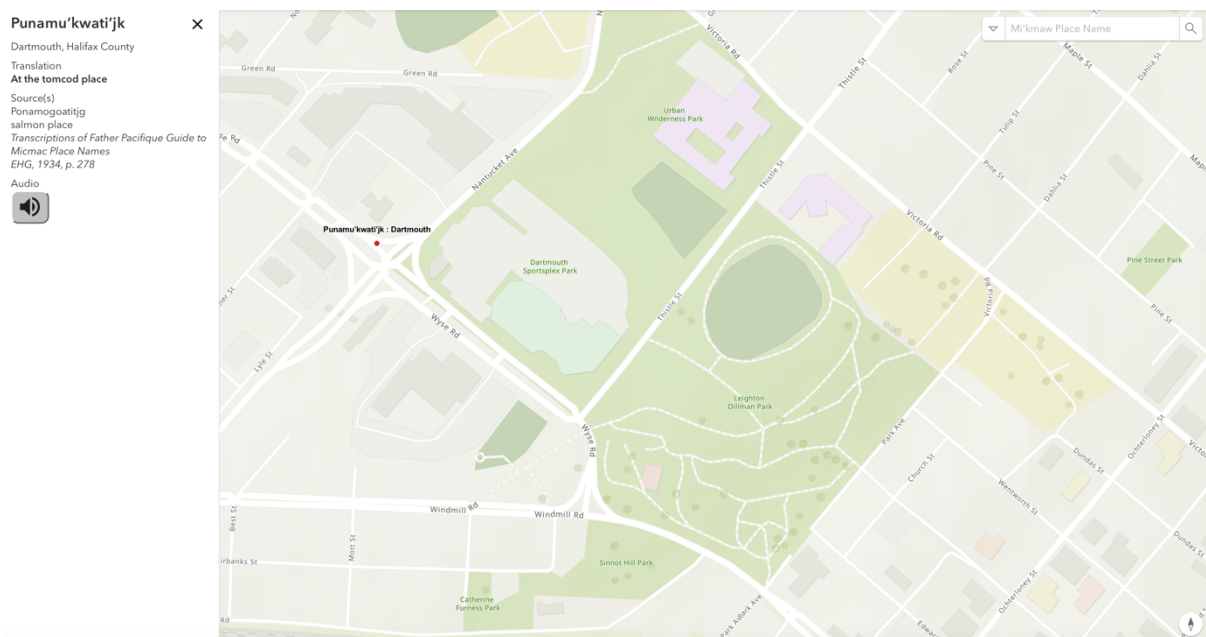


Screen shot for Dartmouth Cemetery area from Google Map

Front Street becomes Portland Street
Asylum Road becomes Pleasant Street
Canal Street becomes Prince Albert Road
(as do Truro Road and Preston Road)
Coloured Meeting Road becomes Ochterloney Street
(as do Gates Road and The Road from Skerry Inn)
Ropeworks Road becomes Wyse Road
Basin Road becomes Windmill Road
(as does Windsor Road)
Quarrell Street becomes Queen Street
Fifth Street becomes Dundas Street
Fourth Street becomes Wentworth Street
Water Street becomes Commercial Street becomes Alderney Drive

I am remapping Dartmouth at a point just after the 1867 Confederation. It's a time of colonialism and the rapid growth and concentration of shipping, extractive and industrial power. British colonialists were worried about the consolidation of political and economic power south of the border after the conclusion of the Civil War in the US. The development of a national railway system and inland shipping routes were intended to counter this. In Dartmouth, the

Intercolonial Railway line snaked along the harbour, and a business consortium established the Shubenacadie Canal system to create a commercial route connecting Atlantic ports to inland markets. The appropriation of the territories traditionally used by the Indigenous people of the region, the Mi'kmaq, had begun with the arrival of the British in the 1720's, and by 1850 Westward expansion and other policies and edicts had led to greater injustices. The Mi'kmaq had fewer rights and were increasingly less welcome in what had become a busy town. Corona may have seen their encampment sites nearby in this place which had been known for centuries (if not millennia) as *Punamu'kwati'jk* ("tom cod place") in the Mi'kmaw language. She may have seen Mi'kmaw baskets, axe handles, hockey sticks and snowshoes for sale at the Saturday market.



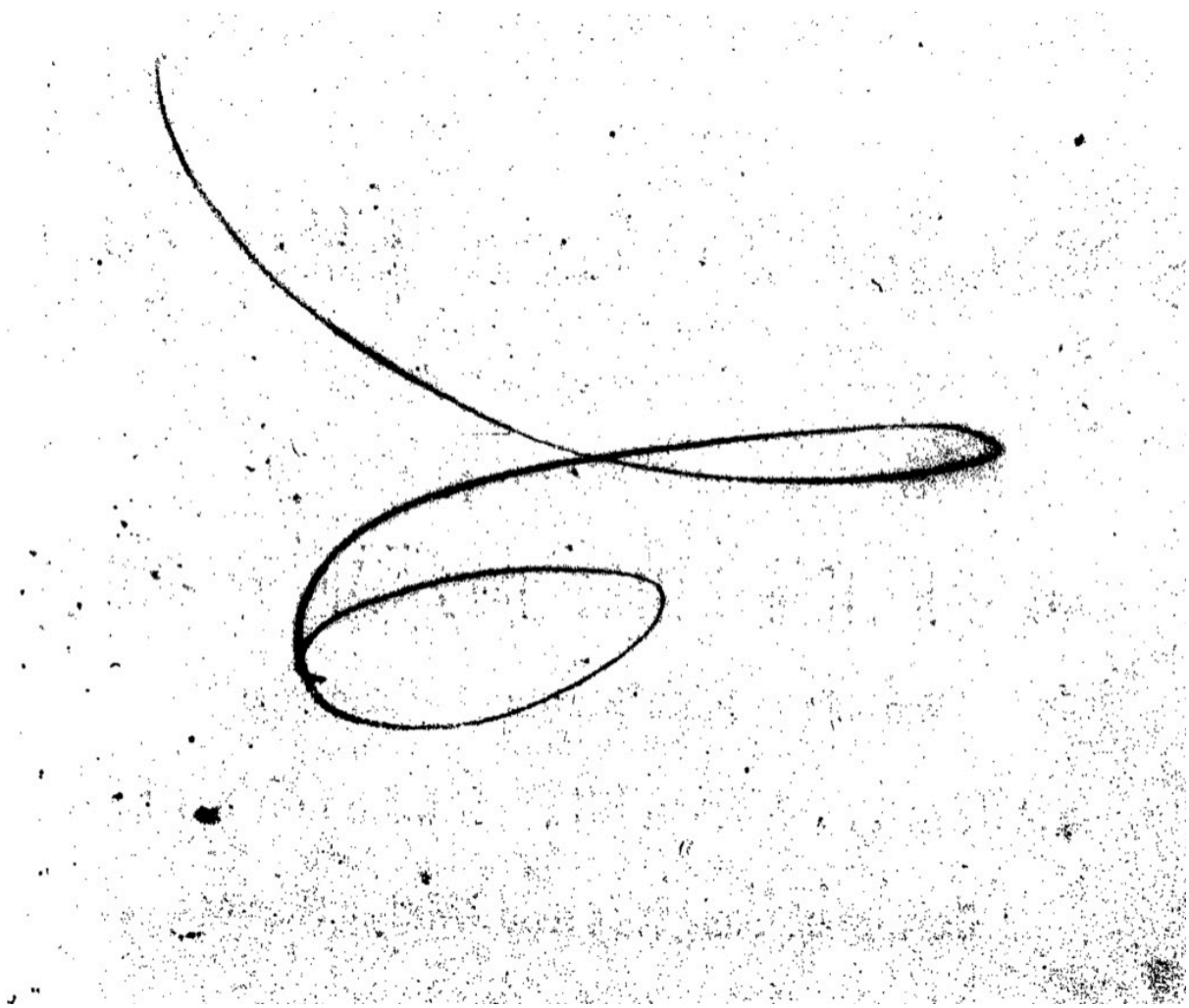
Screen shot from Mi'kmaw Place Names website <https://placenames.mapdev.ca>

In Corona's time, extractive activities and economies based in fishing, forestry and mining were well-established. Ice harvesting was big business on the lakes near her home. Skating, hockey and horse races on the lakes were very popular. In his diary, Reg Walker often wrote of going skating.

From annotations for *Corona Walker: Crowning*, March 7, 2021:

The Dartmouth skate factory makes 11 million pairs of skates, and then the business fails. 11 million people skate in small, precise, stiff-legged steps, falter, fail, fall. Then they glide, race, spin. Reg and Corona move in tandem, feet in unison, the rhythm of right then left, arms linked, or hands held or inside fur muffs. They swing wide, low over the surface, smooth and fast, making that crisp cutting sound as the blades slice arcs over the ice. Corona skates for the sound of it, her feet with blades cutting the ice into ruts, chips and gouges, and finally, to powder.

Kssshhh
Kssshhh
Kssshhh



Detail from census record (NS Archives) 1

Corona's stepfather was a miner, perhaps at one of the gold mines just outside Dartmouth in Montague Gold Mines or Waverley. In town, manufacturing and trade included shipbuilding; Corona's father (who died when she was an infant) was a ship's carpenter. A point in the geometry of transatlantic trade founded in slavery, Dartmouth was home to a sugar refinery, spice and cocoa mills, and molasses works. Dartmouth magnates and entrepreneurs profited from the local manufacture of barrels, beer, nails, bricks, rope and twine. Foundries, forges and printing shops, along with general stores and dairies operated throughout Corona's neighbourhood.

Corona, crown, aura, haze. A cloud of pollen, snow, dust, ashes.



Melancholy Saturday group walk, June 19, 2021. The location is in the Montague Gold Mines area just outside Dartmouth

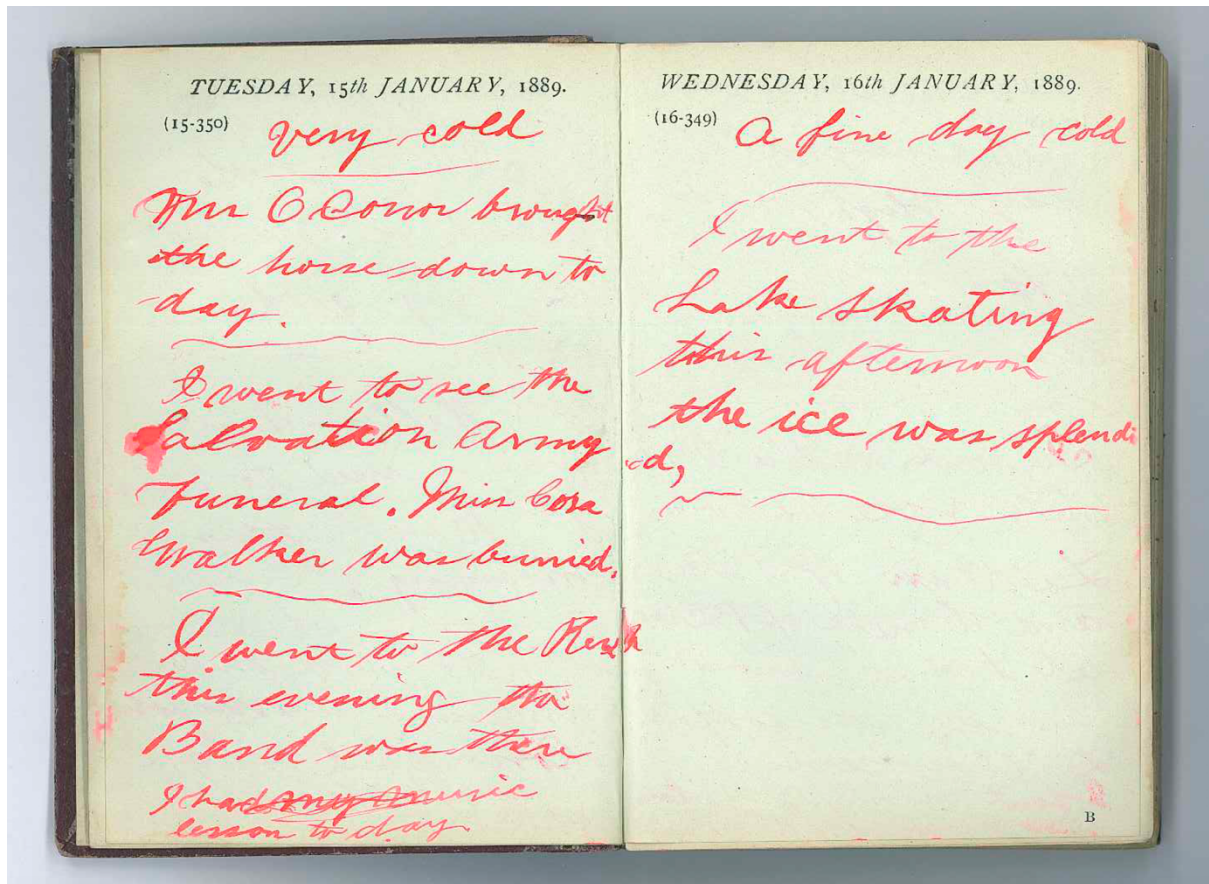


Arriving at the cairn on Melancholy Mountain, which marks the place where two young sisters perished in dense woodland outside Dartmouth in 1842

1889 was a time of illiteracy, poverty, illness and high mortality rates. There were only 19 public wells and water pumps in the town of 5000 people. What did Corona die from? Cholera?

Diphtheria? Tuberculosis? Influenza? Scarlet fever? Not the "Russian Flu", which arrived in late 1889. Did she suffer from a congenital illness or condition? Was there an accident?

There are other mysteries. How was Corona's grave excavated in the middle of January, during a period of Very Cold weather? Her family was not wealthy. Who paid for the headstone?



Pages from Reg Walker's diary, on the day of Corona Walker's funeral (Dartmouth Heritage Museum)

With bedrock below, the grave might not have been excavated to a full six feet; even so, we calculated that it would have taken the nine of us who gathered there a full day to dig enough handfuls of frozen earth to properly inter Corona's coffin.



A handful of frozen earth gathered in the cemetery during Very Cold, January 24, 2021

How were Corona's funeral and headstone paid for? According to Reg's diary, she received a graveside Salvationist funeral. Her mother, as noted in the 1870 register of Corona's birth, had converted from Methodism to Salvationism (and then back to Methodism by 1881). This was the era of Temperance campaigns, asylums, poor houses, workhouses, orphanages, jails and prisons. Corona lived in a neighbourhood that was also home to the Inebriate Asylum, and not far from the Mount Hope Lunatic Asylum.



midpoint during the Crossing Macdonald Bridge walk (part of 52 more), July 31, 2021. Could that be Cory Walker in the foreground on the left?

Where was the future for an 18-year-old girl? The 1881 census listed her as attending school when she was 11. In her teens, perhaps Corona attended the new high school in her neighbourhood, which had recently allowed girls to attend. Did she walk out the door to go and buy her pencil?



With humans and more-than-humans in the desolate zone during the At Dartmouth Cove Walk, March 28, 2021

With these questions persisting, and the scantness of information, Corona remains a phantom.

Walking was my freedom, my joy, my affordable transportation, my method of learning to understand places, my way of being in the world, my way of thinking through my life and my writing, my way of orienting myself.

From *Recollections of My Nonexistence*, Rebecca Solnit³

In her 2020 memoir, Solnit wrote of how young women are made invisible through threats to their bodies, confidence, and identities. For Solnit, and for many of us, mobility on foot provides a way of being present in ourselves, in public and private spaces.

To date, the scored walks about Corona Walker, and the speculations that have emerged, are:

1. *Very Cold*, January 24, 2021, Dartmouth Public Cemetery. We gathered at Corona Walker's graveside, concerned with mortality, embodiment and distancing, and coldness.
2. *Crowning*, March 7, 2021, Sullivan's Pond. Marking Corona's birth date, we struggled to recall our own and others' births while walking alongside the canal and lake. Intoxication and being transported were invoked as we toasted Corona Walker on the hillside where the Inebriate Asylum once stood.
3. *At Dartmouth Cove*, March 28, 2021, Dartmouth waterfront. This is a potent site with Indigenous and settler traces both visible and invisible along the shore, where we shared tea after crossing into the Zone.
4. *Melancholy Saturday*, June 19, 2021, Melancholy Mountain, Montague Gold Mines. A cairn marks the place where two young sisters perished in the dense woods outside Dartmouth in 1842. They got lost in the vicinity of the gold mines, and it is a story that Corona probably knew of. We felt vicarious sadness and a paradoxical conviviality, as our third lockdown had just ended.

5. *Crossing Macdonald Bridge* (as part of #52More by Blake Morris), July 31, 2021, Macdonald Bridge. This was a breezy and social occasion, marked by friendly exchanges. We slipped through the thin space we encountered along the span and found ourselves on the other side.

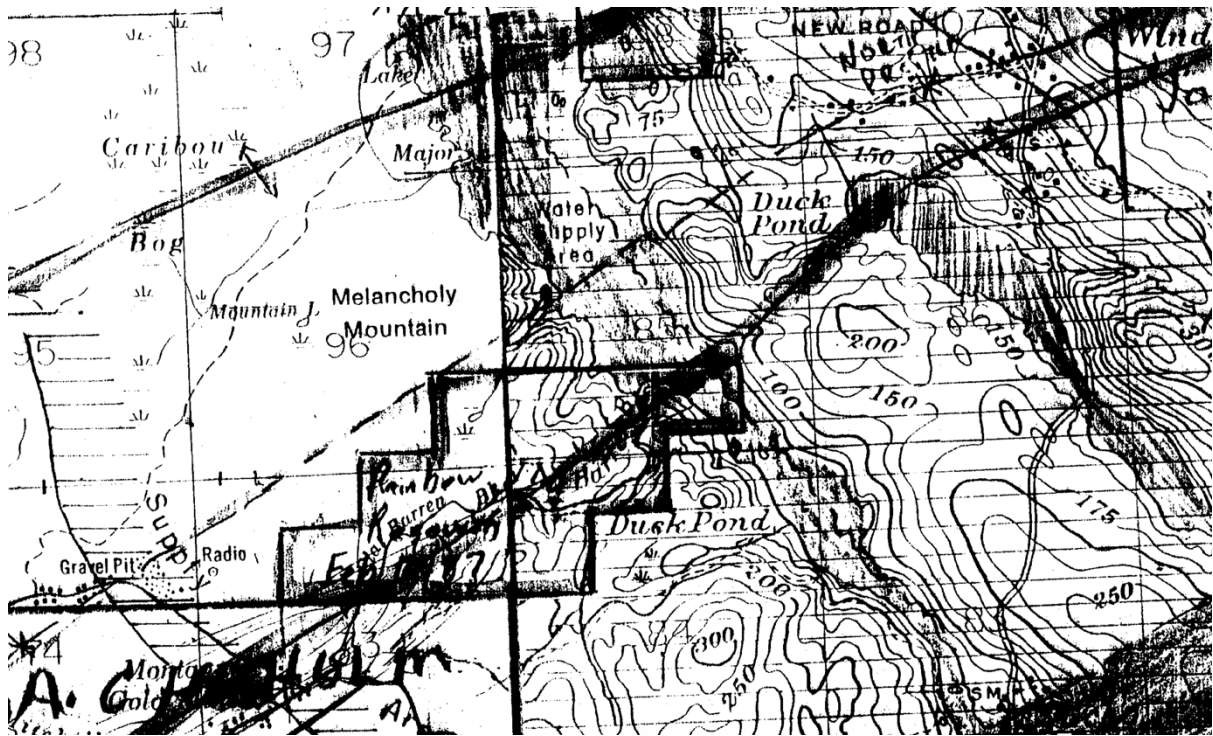
6. *In the Deadhouse*, Cole Harbour Heritage Trail, August 22, 2021. We kept company with bones, storytellers and vagabonds in a paranormal panorama. Stories of what it means to have a home were shared as we wandered the old grounds of the County Home, known in Victorian times as the Home for the Harmless Insane.

Upcoming

7. *The Commons*, Dartmouth Commons and Public Cemetery, TBA. The concluding walk will circle around the site of a ghostly skating rink, as we look for ancestors and an early gold mine. It all ends at the graveside.



On foot through the cemetery during Very Cold, January 24, 2021



Detail from a map showing Melancholy Mountain and Caribou Bog (NS Archives)



Soaker from Melancholy Saturday walk, June 19, 2021

Barbara Louder
Dartmouth Nova Scotia
2021

Photos contributed by Robert Bean, Brian Lilley, Julia Maclean and the author.

<https://www.instagram.com/coronaiwalker/>

<http://www.walkingartistsnetwork.org/2021/04/01/corona-walker/>

https://www.facebook.com/CoronaIsabelWalker/?ref=page_internal

Notes

¹ Woolf, Virginia. *Street Haunting: A London Adventure*. Redditch: Read Books, 2013.

² Brien, Donna Lee, and Kiera Lindsey, eds. *Speculative Biography: Experiments, Opportunities and Provocations*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021.

³ Solnit, Rebecca. *Recollections of My Nonexistence: A Memoir*. Reprint edition. London: Penguin Books, 2021, p. 58.