

To the ravines! Encountering, exploring, and expanding Toronto's mountain bike trails during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This paper is about how Toronto's urban mountain bike trails offered an escape from the reductive worldview I'm calling the "Covid Cosmology." I describe how in the face of Covid-19 lockdowns, Toronto's mountain bike trails offer cyclists salutary experiences that run counter to those offered by the centralized authorities intent on managing the pandemic. These salutary experiences include: 1) Freedom; 2) Expansion, Optimization & Intensification, 3) Flow, 4) Boundaries, Exclusions, and Creating Community, and 5) Risk.

Informed by non-representational ethnographic approaches (Vannini, 2015), I examine the use and expansion of Toronto's urban mountain bike trails by venturing into the wilds that exist above, below, and alongside urban environments during the pandemic's painful periods of lockdowns. The objective: to speculate about the ways human potential can be expanded with the help of urban wilderness and in response to totalizing ontologies designed to define life itself using a narrow, binaristic worldview.

Keywords: mountain biking, Toronto, flow-risk-freedom, Covid-19, singletrack.

When there was a wilderness, we wandered wild and free.
(Metric, *Pagans in Vegas*, 2015)

What people enjoy is not the sense of being in control, but the sense of exercising control in difficult situations. It is not possible to experience a feeling of control unless one is willing to give up the safety of protective routines. Only when a doubtful outcome is at stake, and one is able to influence that outcome, can a person really know whether she is in control. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 61)

1. Introduction

This paper is about Toronto's urban mountain bikers and the experiences they pursued in the city's expansive trail system during the Covid-19 pandemic. I describe especially how Toronto's mountain bikers sought out and found feelings of freedom and flow amidst these trails during the Covid-19 lockdowns and how mountain biking in the city afforded riders a welcome respite from what I describe as the "Covid Cosmology." I suggest that in the face of lockdowns and restrictions, Toronto's mountain bike trails offered cyclists a range of experiences that ran counter to those offered by the Covid Cosmology. The experiences I will describe include: 1) Feelings of Freedom; 2) Expansion, Optimization & Intensification, 3) Flow, 4) Boundaries, Exclusions & Creating Community, and 5) Risk.



Fig. 1. Don Valley mountain bike trail in the fall (photo by author).

Toronto's mountain bike trails are located in the city's Don River Valley – one of Toronto's vibrant river-lined ravines that gently drain into Lake Ontario (Bonnell, 2014; Bozickovic, 2016). Throughout the pandemic, these trails were used by cyclists in search of feelings of freedom, flow, and ecological escapism. Here I want to focus on the ways nature-loving city dwellers in

Toronto – the fourth largest metropolis in North America – navigated the urban/nature divide during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to pursue adventure along the informal single-track trails that puncture and resist the ever-expanding impositions of Toronto’s urban grid. To do so I will turn to non-representational ethnographic approaches – particularly my own role as a participant and researcher immersed in Toronto’s mountain biking “scene” – to speculate about Covid-19 logics and lockdowns, as well as some of the reasons Toronto’s ravines beckoned to those who sought alternative ways of being and becoming during the Covid-19 crisis.

As described by Canada Research Chair, Dr. Phillip Vannini, non-representational ethnography is a methodological approach premised upon the researcher’s “impressionistic” and “inevitably creative” engagements with their research subject. The goal is to generate reflections that “animate rather than mimic,” that “rupture rather than merely account,” that “evoke rather than just report,” and that “reverberate instead of more modestly resonating”; for Vannini, non-representational ethnography offers a “true escape” from “the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery” (2015, p. 318). As Vannini explains, non-representational ethnographies have much to offer the scholarly community in so far as they animate lifeworlds using evocations that “aim to enliven, render, resonate, rupture, re-imagine” and that “generate possibilities for fabulation” (2015, p. 320). Crucially, non-representational ethnographic research recognizes the researcher’s body as “the key instrument for knowing, sensing, feeling, and relating to other and self” (Vannini, 2015, p. 321) and is an ideal tool for engaging with “body-centered activities that require the performance of skill” and “kinesthetic awareness” (2015, p. 322).

But before we get too deep into this paper’s ethnographic account of mountain biking in the Don Valley in Toronto during Covid-19, let’s explore the conditions that precipitated the need for Torontonians to leave their homes during the lockdowns in search of the urban wilderness, tree portals, and single-track trails that snake through the city’s ravines and provide users with a getaway from the everyday (Vannini & Vannini, 2016).

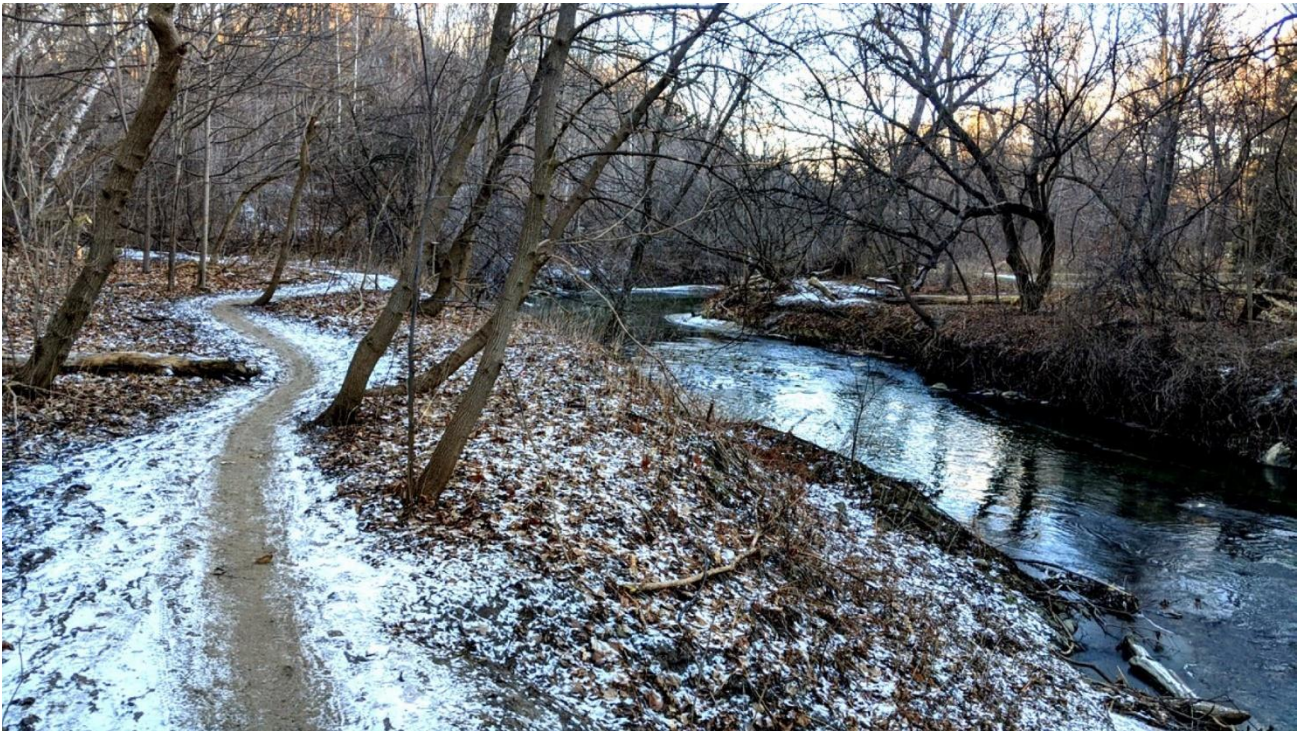


Fig. 2. Don Valley mountain bike trail in the winter (photo by author).

2. Setting the scene: Covid-19

The world's most recent pandemic – Covid-19 – had many tragic consequences on individuals and societies. In Ontario, Canada – the location for this paper's field research – 13288 people have died from or with Covid-19 (ontario.ca, 2022), a death rate of 0.000896 per 100000 citizens. In an effort to slow viral transmission, local politicians and public health officials imposed unprecedented controls, lockdowns, and mandates. These mandates were facilitated – at least in the case of Ontario and its capital city Toronto – by the declaration of emergency orders and mandates, both of which by now (late 2022) have – for the most part – been removed (Taylor-Vaisey, 2022).

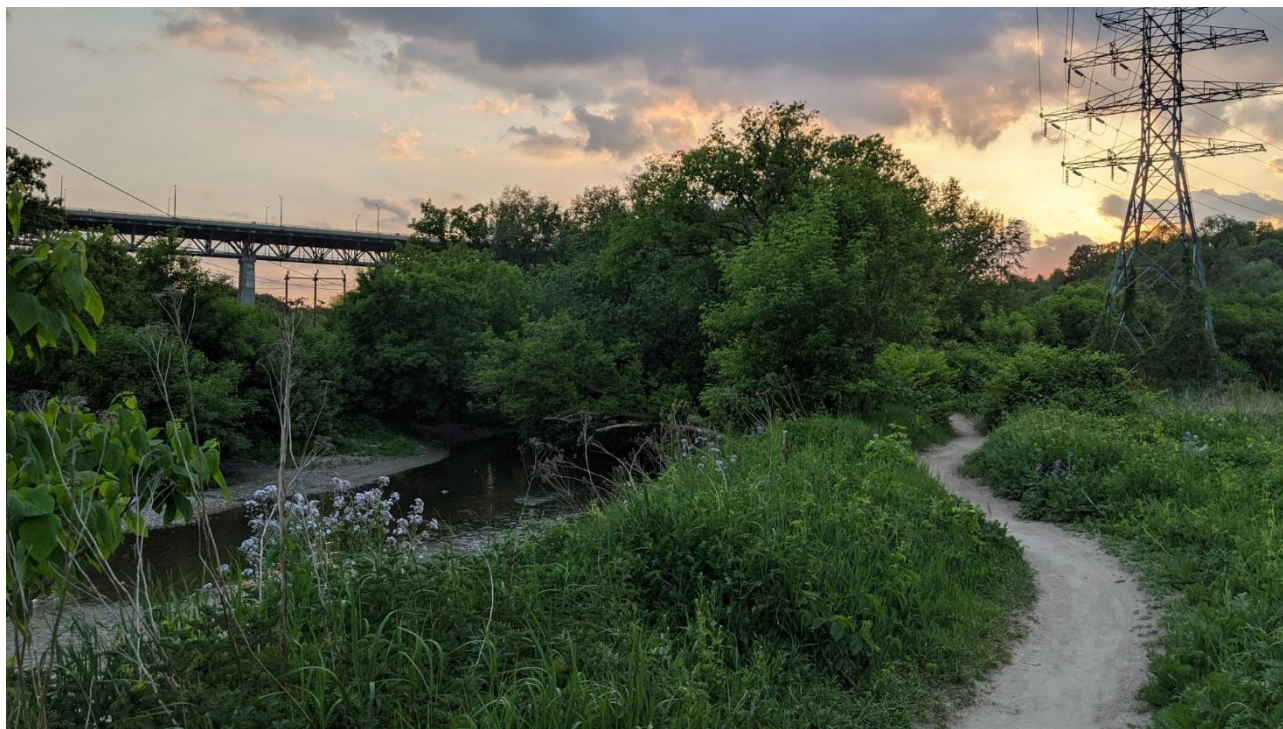


Fig. 3. Don Valley mountain bike trail in the late summer (photo by author).

The controls, orders, and mandates of the Covid-19 era contributed to the emergence of a globally pervasive world view, or even ontology. This ontology functioned to divide the world into black and white categories that offered citizens a sense of medical and moral clarity alongside a manageable list of appropriate behavioural responses; it was an ontology that offered new forms of biomedical management while struggling to account for the collateral damage that often occurred (Critical Art Ensemble, 2002; Joffe, 2021; Kampf & Kulldorff, 2021). This ontology – or “Covid Cosmology” – divided our worlds into manageable couplets and binary categories that narrowed our options while offering us a glimpse of a medically and digitally delimited future managed by vaccine passports and other electronic forms of surveillance (Best, 2010; Kofler & Baylis, 2020). This was a world that digitally separated the “haves” from the “have nots,” the compliant from the resistant. The binaries that defined Covid-19 functioned not only to respond to the complexity of evolving political, public health, or economic priorities, but also to narrow the very field of potential in order to more smoothly facilitate medical, bureaucratic, corporate, and political management (Wimberly, 2017).

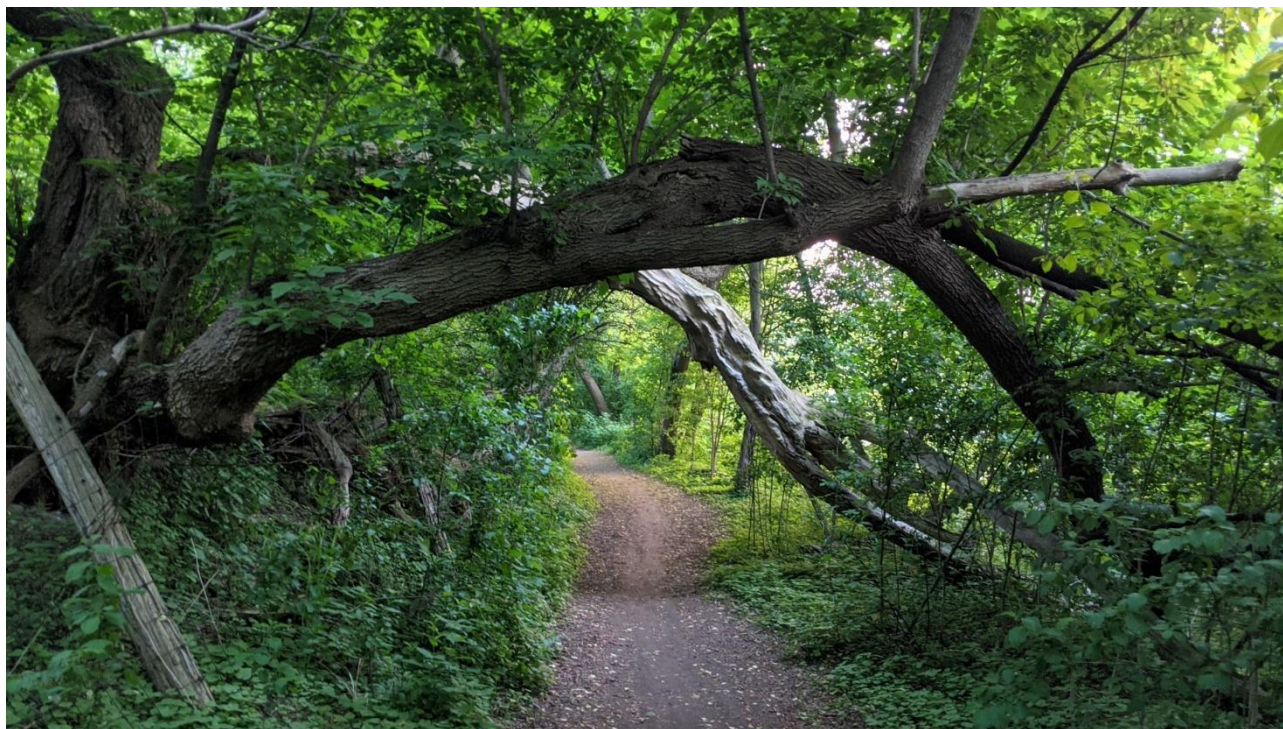


Fig. 4. Don Valley mountain bike trail in the late summer (photo by author).

Within the Covid Cosmology citizens experienced a centralized system able to be efficiently managed with QR codes (Chagla, 2022). Their collective horizons were shaped by binary categories such as: positive/negative, masked/unmasked, emergency/new normal, lockdown/reopening (Bardosh et al., 2022; Dai, et al., 2021; see also: McKinsey, 2019; Rockefeller Foundation, 2021; United Nations, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2019). Resistance to the Covid Cosmology was often ignored or censored (Kleitman, et al., 2021). Governments worked with big tech companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter (Sheng, 2020) to filter information. Pharmaceutical company profits soared and public debt levels surged. Many lost their jobs, friends, family ties, and small businesses (Rider, 2022).

The binaristic options that defined the Covid Cosmology caused millions of citizens in countries like Canada to start wondering whether this “new normal” – this narrowing of potential – was also about normalizing other new realities – realities created by organizations eager to guide or “nudge” society in new ways towards greater conformity and control (Clancy, 2021; Doshi, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Feitsma, 2018; Government of Canada, 2017; Hart, 2022; Ontario.ca, 2020; West et al., 2020; Whitehead, et al. 2019)? In the face of such options, Toronto’s mountain bikers looked to the city’s urban wilderness – its ravines – for a place to get lost in the trees.



Fig. 5. Don Valley mountain bike trail with sketchy bridge in the late summer (photo by author).

3. Toronto's mountain bike community

Having outlined some of the consequences of Covid-19 and the policy response to the pandemic, let's shift gears and explore some of the ways these policies energized and invigorated the mountain bike community in Toronto, specifically in Toronto's Don Valley and its expansive, community built, quasi-sanctioned network of single-track trails. Torontonians cyclists, armed with mobile digital devices, GPS-equipped apps like Strava and Trailforks, and a desire for exploration, sought respite from lockdowns by descending into Toronto's enormous network of ravines – its “upside-down mountains” – and their 100-plus kilometers of urban single-track and mountain bike trails.

Toronto's former Chief Urban Planner Jennifer Keesmat has described Toronto's system of ravines as “a natural, connected sanctuary that is respected as essential to the health of the city and promoted for use and enjoyment through education and stewardship” (City of Toronto, 2015, p. 4). Toronto's ravine system is an often overlooked, but nonetheless impressive and massively significant, part of Toronto's urban infrastructure and is integral to the health, well being, and economic prosperity of Torontonians. Toronto's ravines consist of six watersheds covering more than 44000 acres of urban wilderness and, cumulatively, are one of the largest urban park systems in the world.

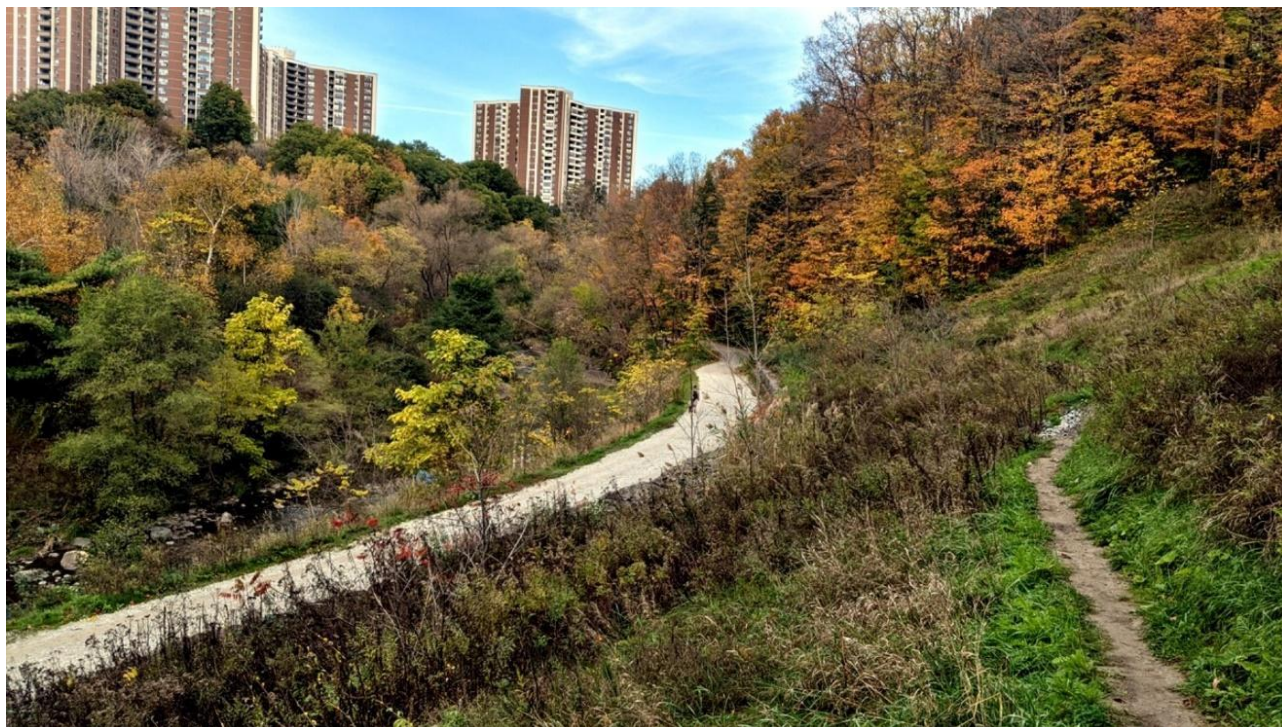


Fig. 6. Don Valley mountain bike trail next to “regular” trail (photo by author).

Encountering nature in the city is overwhelmingly regarded as positive (Cervinka, Röderer & Hefler, 2012; Leong, Fischer & McClure, 2014). Indeed, recent research indicates that the more citizens feel connected to nature and the more they overcome what has been described as “nature deficit disorder” or “ecophobia” (Gaard, 2011; Warkentin, 2011), the more compelled they are to nurture, conserve, and take care of the natural features of their urban environments and local communities (Latimer & Miele, 2013); moreover, connecting with nature in urban settings increases emotional resilience, physical health, and happiness (Balmford, 2005; Bell, 2014; Diener, 2009; Maller et al, 2006; Mantler, 2015; Martinez-Juarez, 2015; Pietilä et al, 2015; Pröbstl-Haider, 2015; Romagosa, 2015; Zelenski, 2014). In other words, much recent research has provided evidence that immersing oneself in natural urban landscapes promotes psychological and physical health (Buchecker & Degenhardt, 2015) – something we all desperately need during pandemics and other crises!

Given urban nature’s overwhelmingly salutary effects, I want to dig deeper into the specific ways emerging modes of urban ecological immersion and escapism are being expressed in Toronto. My thoughts and speculative observations are informed by a mix of non-representational ethnography, theoretical musings, and my ongoing engagement with online forums, cycling apps, and cycling publications that contribute to my belief that cycling in nature in Toronto is about more than merely exercise or getting some fresh air.

Toronto’s diverse mountain biking community has, for 30 more than years, been maximizing Toronto’s oft-neglected Don River Valley by creating “ephemeral infrastructure” amidst Toronto’s bounded territories in the form of 100 kilometres of semi-clandestine singletrack

trails that twist and turn along the edges of ravines walls, and that pass beside sewage treatment plants, hydro-corridors, and decommissioned waste dumps.



Fig. 7. Don Valley mountain bike trail – putting incomplete infrastructure to work (photo by author).

My own mountain bike participation has taken place in parallel with my academic work for almost three decades in Toronto and beyond. During this time, as an academic, I have published and presented research on many topics – from finance and algorithms, to nature and cycling. Alongside these nearly three decades of study and research, I've also been an avid mountain biker. I'm not much of a mountain bike racer (although I like to mention that I *did* participate in one 24-hour race in my mid-twenties at Hardwood Hills mountain bike park in Ontario), but I am a consistently committed mountain biking enthusiast and immersed in these communities. I've also worked as a mountain bike mechanic during my undergrad; I've mountain biked all over Ontario; and I've gone on dedicated mountain bike trips to Utah, West Virginia, North Carolina, Vermont, and British Columbia (including mountain biking destinations such as Whistler and Vancouver's North Shore). In my experience, mountain biking has always been about venturing into unknown worlds, about communing with nature, about finding flow, thrills, and spills, and about being together with old friends and making new ones. I also like that mountain biking is a relatively sustainable and ecologically friendly recreational activity, especially when one bikes to the trails from home, which I do the majority of the time here in Toronto, and a pretty low impact activity (compared to more motorized recreational activities, at least) (Evju et al., 2021).



Fig. 8. Don Valley mountain bike trail next to bridge with graffiti (photo by author).

4. Digital & social media's contribution to mountain biking in Toronto

During the Covid-19 lockdowns and quarantines, Toronto's mountain bikers and adventure seekers were longing for something more, and turned to their phones and apps in pursuit of escape, nature, wildness, and states of flow. Thankfully, Toronto's urban mountain bike trails were more than ready to support the needs of cabin-feverish cyclists. And thanks to digital devices, apps like Strava and Trailforks, and the crowd-sourced data that was especially at hand during Covid-19 (including an increasing number of YouTube videos featuring riders enjoying Toronto's trails), these trails had been made visible to many who – during the pandemic – were able to experience them for the first time. Most striking, however, was that as the pandemic continued, new trails continued popping up in the ravines (with names like Moartown, Donaconda, Trash Panda, and Trail Apples), seemingly in response to the demands of growing numbers of mountain bikers, and as a result of Toronto's urban wilderness having become increasingly transparent and accessible thanks to the affordances of digital technologies intersecting with the desires of locked down cyclists. These new trails are always built by fellow mountain bikers in order to add to the community. The trail builders tend to prefer anonymity or obscurity given the “underground” nature of this trail system and the ambiguous relationship of the mountain bike community with city bureaucracies, etc.

The use of digital technologies in the recent development and popularization of the Don Valley's mountain bike trails is key to these trails' ongoing expansion – particularly during Covid. The massive impact of digital technologies and mobile devices (such as smartphones, GPS devices, GoPro sports cameras) is particularly notable given these trails' longstanding and fraught history with the city – one that has often been antagonistic, in so far as the trails represented an unsanctioned use of public property and were typically associated with environmental degradation and “extreme” trail users (Blackett, 2010; Merringer, 2011). In fact, “back in the day” – until about 2010 – the trails' whereabouts (their routes, entry and exit points, etc.) were only passed from one rider to another by word of mouth. There were no physical maps, no online PDFs to consult, no detailed point-to-point descriptions. But with the advent of smartphones, GoPro sports cameras, GPS systems, and three online platforms in particular – YouTube, and apps Trailforks and Strava – the whereabouts, status, and difficulty of Toronto's mountain bike trails has been revealed for all to see. Since then, the riding community has changed and expanded and there's no going back now!

The increasing visibility of the trails has contributed, in turn, to more users and an expansion of the trail network. After all, natural surface trails – even in a metropolis – are only viable if many people use them, since plant overgrowth and tree fall results in trails inevitably disappearing over time. The role of Strava and Trailforks, by encouraging more ridership, also contributes to the upkeep and resilience of the trails themselves. Indeed, where once the visibility of the trails would have been regarded as a risk to their existence (due to the liability-obsessed naysaying of the city), today the visibility of the trails is integral to the maintenance of the ever expanding trail network.

For those mountain bikers intent on escaping to the wild outdoors during the Covid lockdowns, Strava and Trailforks were especially integral to their ability to access and explore Toronto's mountain bike trails system. While both apps offer GPS-enabled location and mapping information, they serve different purposes (but can also be connected to one another).

Strava, on the one hand, allows users to create their own trail “segments” that correspond to certain user-determined stretches of trail. Once created, users can track multiple data points that correspond to categories such as: speed, elevation, power (watts outputted), difficulty, trail popularity, and how their adventures and trajectories compare to other users; additionally, based on aggregated user data, Strava allows users to view the Strava Global Heatmap (<https://www.strava.com/heatmap>), where trails and user trajectories are viewable on a global scale and are represented using differing levels of colour intensity that corresponds to how popular or trafficked a given section or segment of trail is based on user data.



Fig. 9. View of Toronto skyline from Don Valley mountain bike trail (photo by author).

Trailforks, on the other hand, compliments Strava by focusing more on trail status (e.g. dry, muddy, icy), trail descriptions, trail elevations and other geographical details in order to offer mountain bike specific data on particular trail systems and infrastructure. Together – along with the Strava Global Heatmap and ongoing updates, additions, and data – these apps offer an unprecedented amount of information for would-be mountain bikers intent on going on two-wheeled urban adventures surrounded by as much wilderness as downtown Toronto has to offer.

Personally, the apps and features I find most useful are: 1) Strava's Global Heatmap, which I use to identify popular routes, obscure or unknown riding locations, as well as slowly emerging evidence that new trails are being built in the Don's trail network; 2) Trailforks' GPS mapping abilities, which keep me from getting lost in the field, and 3) Strava's ability to serve as a sort of "social media" app, allowing me to follow other riders' rides and accounts, or to use Strava's "Flyby" function to see who else was on the trails with me during my rides.

5. Five mountain biking experiences that afford riders an exit from the Covid Cosmology

In what follows I reflect – based on my own experiences as a mountain biker in the Don and on the experiences of others, both on and offline – on six experiences that locked down Torontonians may have encountered as they made their way down from Toronto's urban grid into the city's ravines. The experiences I will be reflecting on are: 1) Feelings of Freedom, 2) Expansion, Optimization & Intensification, 3) Flow, 4) Boundaries, Exclusions, and Creating Community, and 5) Risk. All of these experiences were restricted during the height of the Covid lockdowns. Indeed, with little emphasis during Covid on the value of physical fitness, being outdoors in the sunshine (for vitamin D, for instance), or cardiovascular workouts, mountain biking in the Don Valley in Toronto – whether over the winter or during the spring and summer season – often felt like an illicit act. Indeed, I recall one day early in the Covid-19 lockdowns, that police vehicles were combing the ravine's parklands in search of people illegally having a picnic or sharing a park bench together.

5.1. Feelings of Freedom

The Don's mountain bike trails are the result of the desires of the trail builders and trail blazers; we benefit today from their sweat, choices, vision, effort, and dirty fingernails. These mountain bike trails are the effects of the desires and collective choices of individual trail builders and cycling enthusiasts over time. The Don's trails are almost all below the surface of the city's grid. To access them, riders (or hikers, dog walkers, etc.) must find their way down into the ravine and, more crucially, must be able to find their way back out. Just recently I ran into a group of teenagers on their bicycles, lost, on the wrong side of the river, unable to bike back up the rocky, rooty, and steep trails to their destination kilometres away.

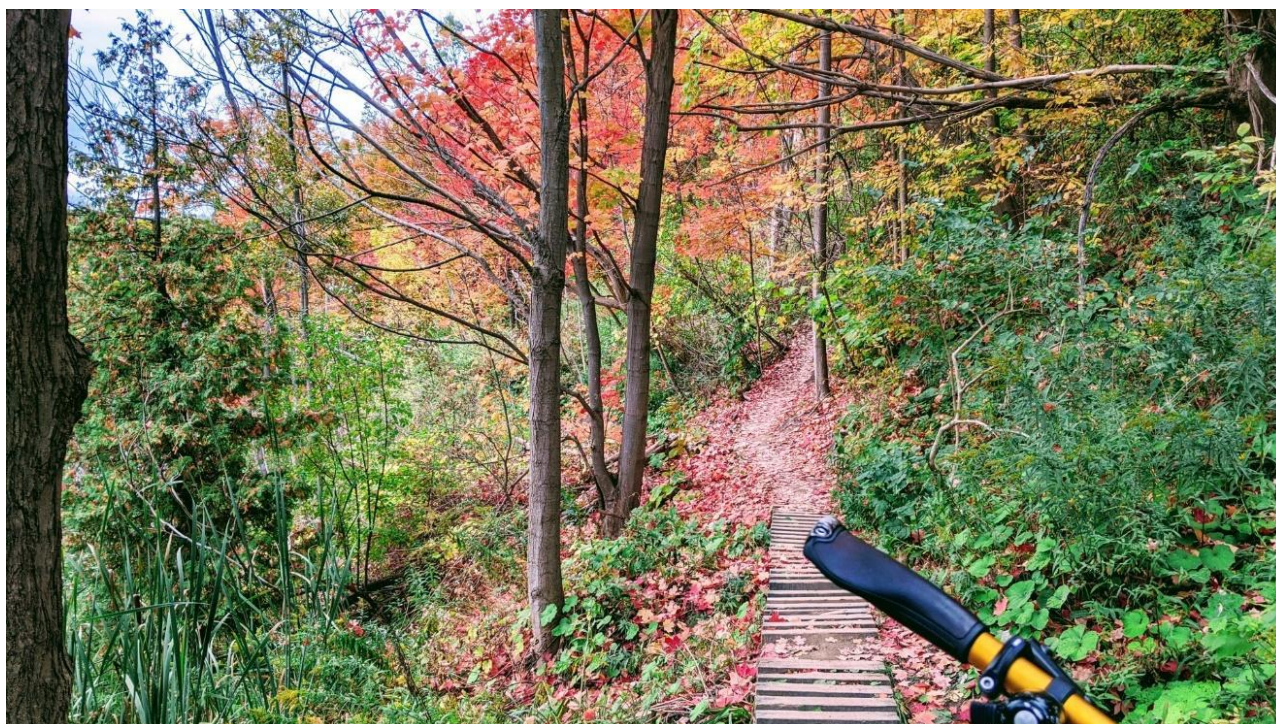


Fig. 10. Don Valley mountain bike trail with small rider-built bridge (photo by author).

The Don River Valley's mountain bike trails are usually entered through a gap in the trees, often only identifiable by the faint outlines of a trail. But by puncturing the city/nature divide one is taken across a threshold that separates the urban grid from the wilds of the urban wilderness below. By breaching the thicket, copse, grove, or brambles one begins a descent into a world with fewer grids, fewer rules, more creativity, more options, and more flow. Once you roll across this threshold, the temperature drops, the air is fresher, and the smells are of pine, decaying leaves, and dirt. Note too that these are not static thresholds or wilds – they change by day and are transformed with weather and by the seasons. They offer riders a different experience every time. When in the Don, the city disappears above as the ravines and tree tunnels open to welcome the urban adventurers and explorers. How different this experience is from a Zoom meeting! Or your bedroom office! Or the pandemic pajama bottoms you've worn for a week! Upon crossing the city/nature divide one experiences an opening rather than a closing. Options rather than orders. Motion rather than mandates. So many sensations!

So what exactly is it that beckons to us from the gaps in the trees and urges us to pursue the path that gestures towards the woods? How do these arboreal openings seemingly invite us in, urge us to explore, to uncover their earthly offerings (Tiessen, 2007)? Admittedly, we might not all be compelled to respond affirmatively to these invitations of nature (though we all have our inviting experiences to which we respond), but for those of us pulled into the forest we are left wondering: What force is doing the pulling? Conversely, from what are we escaping? And in plunging into the woods, what do we become? And what do we leave behind?

Certainly there is a transformation that takes place. In my case – especially during Covid – upon cresting the threshold and plunging into the tree lined trails I become a projectile, a bird, a

trajectory. No longer am I a desk-monkey or locked down subject. Instead, I follow the curves, pursue desire lines, avoid the roots, feel the wind, breathe the moist air, hear the scratch of my tires in the dirt and the call of the birds from the trees. What are these sensations, these elemental experiences and feelings? Instinct? Am I experiencing an immune response? At the very least I am improvisationally pursuing freedom from those forces that I needed to escape, whatever they were. I am reclaiming agency, mobility, maskless breathing, speed, excitement. My temperature rises, I sweat, I breathe heavily, my legs pound, my feet spin in endless circles, my yearning for pleasure and pain is being satiated, my body is an expression of health rather than a suspected source of sickness.



Fig. 11. Don Valley mountain bike trail (photo by author).

Of course I am not alone. Other cyclists, hikers, joggers, nature photographers, foragers are here in the Toronto's urban wilds with me. Are we all seeking similar things? Or are we all just seeking to *escape* similar things? What are these woods, these trails, these trees whispering to us? Regardless, here we are free to choose our own way, our own paths, our own futures. Time slides away. Timeless time takes over.

But freedom in these woods is not endless nor boundless. There are rules: trails to follow, trees to dodge, inclines and declines to overcome, fear, resist. There is also trail etiquette to adhere to: oncoming climbing riders get priority, no skidding, ride through puddles not around them, say "solo" or "last one" or "three back" to oncoming riders to warn them of approaching

bikers, pick up litter if you can, greet your fellow trail users with a smile, nod, or “hello.” These rules shape the experience, reveal to us the edges of what’s possible, ensure that our experiences of freedom in the forest are not simply chaos, and remind us that with freedom comes responsibility, duty, consequences.

So how to define this feeling of what feels like “freedom”? One way to think of a space like the Don Valley mountain bike trails is as a third space, separate from the binaries, grids, and rigid demands of the city above. Here the bureaucracy, red tape, budgets, and planning is left behind. What emerges instead is unsanctioned ephemeral infrastructure created through grassroots initiative, maintained by enthusiasts, embraced by flow seeking freedom seekers, and sustained by good will. This third space – which is enormously expansive – is intensified because of its very proximity to that for which it is a foil. Here in the woods the striations of everyday life seem as though they can be left behind. Adventure awaits.

I should recognize too that what these ravines and their mountain bike trails represent for me does not mean that they represent “freedom, etc.” for others – even other riders. My point is merely to suggest that these ravines offer something profoundly *different* than what is offered elsewhere in the city, and that this otherness became particularly salient, valuable, and desirable during Covid. Additionally, while everyone obviously experiences the Don River Valley and its trails and ravines differently, I would like to suggest that of all of its users, it’s the Don’s mountain bikers that – perhaps – make the most of the ravines. After all, the Don’s tributaries and ravine edges are essentially large ditches, resulting from the massive flows of water from the melting of the last glaciers following the previous ice age around 10000 years ago. In other words, these ravines are anything but “mountains,” the ideal landscape for mountain bikers to ply their trade. But despite these meagre slopes, Toronto’s mountain bikers shape these river-edge cliffs and elevations *into* mountains by optimising the trails using switchback climbs, and endless, short, steep, pitched ascents and descents.

But here again, the malleability, flexibility, potential of the ravines reveal themselves since these trails are actually rather “world class” as far as mountain bike infrastructure goes. Indeed, *Bike Magazine* – an award-winning mountain bike magazine – wrote a longform article on the Don trails in 2018 (pre-Covid) wherein author Devon O’Neil described the Don trails by saying that “Toronto holds the most unlikely promised land in North American mountain biking, a bounty of such challenge and character and unfathomable variety that I will struggle to explain it for months” (O’Neil, 2018). O’Neil, a mountain bike industry veteran who was encountering the Don and its users for the first time, explains that the trail network, “in a pair of glacial ravines known simply as ‘the Don,’ carries an almost mythical reputation among those who frequent it. With 60 miles of handbuilt singletrack wedged in a city of 6 million people, it’s hard to comprehend how it remained a secret for so long. But before [ride tracking apps like] Trailforks and Strava, only those who knew someone – or were willing to spend hundreds of hours exploring – had any idea how expansive it was” (O’Neil, 2018).

5.2. Expansion, optimization & intensification

Expansiveness is something that can be experienced in the Don. The trail network has up to 100km of divergent, overlapping, intertwining connections – so there’s room to roam. Few can ride it all in a single day – though some try, if their online GPS routes posted to websites and

apps like Strava are any indication. The Don allows mountain bikers to stretch their wings, to explore, to extend their adventures – and by extension themselves – over vast territories. The Don offers spaces for exploration, unknown and uncharted territories for conquering. It offers trails of different difficulties and varying risks. These spaces are where new skills develop, new challenges emerge, new victories are achieved, new possibilities are encountered. In other words, the Don offers us territories within which we can discover what we're capable of and affords us opportunities to optimize and actualize our potential and innate powers. As mountain bikers, we seek to improve our skills – our climbing, descending, speed, cornering ability, technical riding abilities – and in such instances the Don delivers, or at least it provides terrain, obstacles, and ravine walls that challenge riders of all skill levels to improve. You see, a mountain biker can only climb so steep a hill or traverse so technical a rock section; that being the case, even a geological ditch like the Don can – if cultivated in a way that maximizes its affordances – offer challenges for even the most extreme rider to master. Mastery, in turn, results in the unfolding of further optimization which, in turn, contributes to the ongoing expansion of the mountain biker's horizons – whether in terms of skills or sense of self.



Fig. 12. Don Valley mountain bike trail creating a third space by passing under train bridge (photo by author).

This potential for expansion – the ability to access expansive spaces and in turn expand oneself – is another aspect of the Don trails that runs counter to the Covid Cosmology and its solutions that were playing out on the city's surface. Instead of a system built around obedience to narrow ontologies, the Don offers a graduated range of potential opportunities that allow its users the freedom to cultivate and nurture their best selves. The question the trail builders always seem to be asking themselves is: How can we shape the land and carve the trails in a way

that allows people to maximize their potential without making the challenge too overwhelming? Or how can we maximize achievable difficulty? Or how can we create a graduated set of challenges across a vast expanse that allows users to discover what they're capable of becoming (as a way of discovering who they are and can be). Indeed, perhaps the greatest fear of the Don mountain biking community is that the city lays claim to the trails, potentially dumbing them down for more general audiences, making them more accessible, less challenging, and lacking – therefore – opportunities for infrastructural or personal expansion.

5.3. Flow

If there's anything that everyone can enjoy its achieving states of flow, experiencing effortless movement, being “in the zone,” experiencing near unconscious progression through space and time as one achieves intended milestones and goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). As Csikszentmihalyi explained in his bestselling book *Flow* in which he popularized the concept, “[f]ollowing a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex than it had been before. It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow” (1990, p. 41).

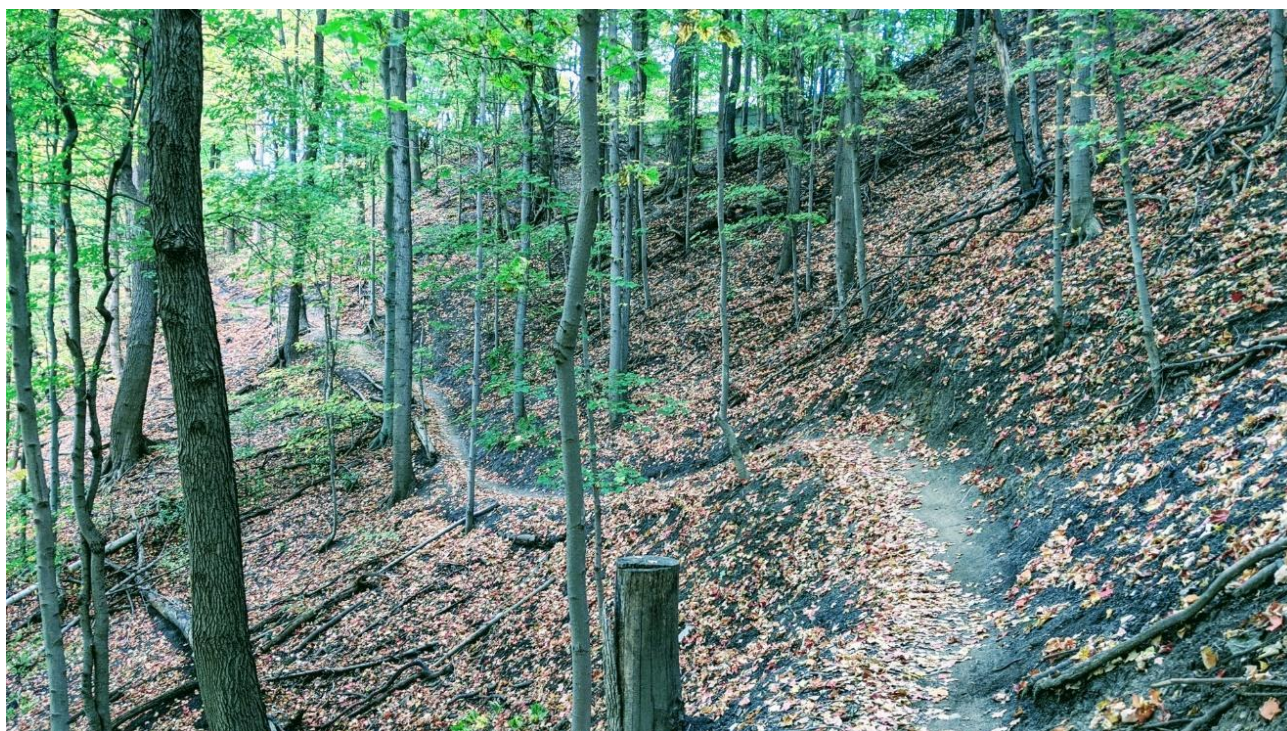


Fig. 13. Don Valley mountain bike trail (photo by author).

Flow is on offer in the Don. The trails constantly undulate, pushing you forward. There are a proliferating number of small jumps with which to catch air – to fly – and many rollercoaster-like drops and descents that thrill every time. Cycling, in general, is a shortcut to experiencing states of flow – that blissful combination of mobility, speed, fear, expertise, technique, and risk that results in an affective high or euphoria. Experiences of flow are also

experienced by mountain biking in the Don, and elsewhere, due to the rhythmic pulsing of the back and forth twists and turns – it doesn't take too many S-curves to get into the mood! To-ing and fro-ing through the woods at speed results in heightened levels of intensity, a sensorially compressed sense of space, and an accelerated experience of time that puts one's worldly worries in the rear-view mirror. Attention instead is attuned to not crashing, to staying upright, to rolling faster, to railing the berms harder, to landing jumps, to nailing climbs. The mind defragments. The prescriptiveness of the Covid Cosmology is forgotten for a time. A heightened level of awareness, pleasure, thrill, fear, challenge, and desire aligns to satisfy our urge for the things we're yearning for – or yearning to escape.

Flow is also achieved by editing out risks – by focusing on goals, by just having goals. In the pursuit of flow, trail-builders and riders embrace natural obstacles and impediments rather than avoiding, removing, or flattening them. Indeed, the bigger the gap, the steeper the decline, and the “sicker” the drop, the more the riders are compelled to rise to the challenge. I've noted, for instance, that professional downhill mountain bikers could not possibly be assessing all the risks – rocks, roots, trees, dropoffs – that confront them as they hurtle down mountains at breakneck speed. Rather, what they are doing is *editing out* incoming information and inputs at rapid speed. They are not taking stock of all the things that make the trajectory difficult, insurmountable, impossible; rather, they are attuned only to the possible, to the goal. They edit out the risks, because merely focusing on risks does not serve the objective: the need for speed, the need for flow. These racers are following paths of least resistance in order to discover how fast they can descend, to improve on their previous best times, to encounter what is possible. This too runs counter to the Covid Cosmology, which focused so much on risks, obstacles, and dangers that all the collateral damage brought about by doing so was ignored. The effects, in turn, were often horrifying (and largely ignored).



Fig. 14. Finding flow and urban infrastructure on a Don Valley mountain bike trail (photo by author).

5.4. Boundaries, exclusions & creating community

Although vast, the expansiveness of the Don trail system is not without limit. It's a more or less delineated space, with insides and outsides, inclusions and exclusions, and fairly distinct boundaries. While from a certain perspective these boundaries set limits on what can be done within them, they also define the third space within which the activities and experiences offered by the Don can happen. The third spaces in the Don exist as separate from the sanitized snippets that all too often define our experiences of nature in the city. Instead of fenced in, manicured, hand planted and curated environments, the Don's third spaces are unruly, unmanicured, and forgotten zones of wilderness that have been left alone just long enough to take on a life of their own. These places, thereby, offer a degree of impenetrability, mystery, foreboding – qualities that compel, in this instance, Toronto's mountain bikers who have become frustrated with the imperatives of more civilized samples of urbanized or planned nature, to explore ways to break free from the grids that demarcate how human beings can or cannot cavort amidst the greenery. That being the case, the thresholds, boundaries, barriers, borders of the Don trails are integral not only to the experience, but also determine the nature of what is possible.

Indeed, the Don mountain bike infrastructure is not simply defined by the boundaries that separate the city grid above from the wildness below the city's surface. After all, within the Don Valley there also are many domesticated, developed, and officially sanctioned spaces that are meant to be experienced by wide swathes of the general public: paved bike paths, drinking fountains, public bathrooms, picnic areas, parking lots, horse stables, park benches, sports fields, and more. But these are not where the mountain bikers go. Indeed, these more

pedestrian spaces designed by the city to accommodate the masses, are actively avoided, circumnavigated, punctured, traversed, escaped whenever possible by the mountain bikers. During Covid, for example, new mountain bike trails were built that ran exactly parallel to – but separate from – the paved routes: they meandered around the parking lots while connecting pre-existing trails to one another. This connectivity serves as a network within the pre-existing and expanding network of the city’s own infrastructure. So while both the domesticated Don and the mountain bike trail infrastructure occupy the same valley, they exist as separate but overlapping domains with their own borders and boundaries, users, builders, and advocates. At the same time as the Don’s mountain bike trails exist within bounded territories that cater to particular users and interests, these boundaries evolve and expand as the mountain biking community continually seeks to extend the network outward, to fill in the gaps, to maximize the ravine’s affordances, and to foster an interconnected network wherein users can experience flow. Trails also sometimes disappear: they get wiped out in a landslide when the ravine walls crash into the river due to erosion, or they fall into disuse because they just aren't very good trails to begin with (too little flow, too much difficulty, too proximal to city infrastructure). Since the goal of the mountain bikers is to be able to experience flow-states in an evolving environment of speed, nature, thrills, and spills, the trail network must be expanded, interconnected, refined, maintained, improved, optimized.



Fig. 15. Don Valley mountain bike trail and community member (photo by author).

Hence the boundaries of these wild spaces must remain flexible, malleable, conditional. But wherever they are, and no matter how contingent they might be, the boundaries of the Don's mountain bike trails are always distinct from the world outside and thereby allow the magical experiences that go on within them to remain protected from encroachment from undesirable entities that risk infringing upon the fragile interplay of terrain, desire, risk taking, and flow-seeking that define the insides (the mountain bike trails, users, and infrastructure) from the outsides (the city's grid, the above world, the Covid Cosmology that seeks to control even outdoor territories where adventure, risk, potential, and vitality prevail). The boundedness that defines the insides from the outsides and that determines the accessibility of these trails, although selectively exclusionary, enables the goals of this particular community to be

expressed. This expression is made powerful and desirable by offering something beyond that which can be found at the surface. The perimeter at the trails' edge that for some appears frightening, dangerous, daunting, dusty, rocky, dark, etc. creates the internal coherence that allows the community to express its desires relatively unmolested. The city turns a blind eye. Less skilled trail users fear being run over by more experienced cyclists. A sort of homeostasis is achieved within which one possible objective – flow and freedom! – can be pursued by those who seek it.

5.5. Risk

Finally, let's talk about risk – that which the Covid Cosmology points to when proposing lockdowns. Of course, a single-minded pursuit of risk-avoidance can itself be dangerous, and must always be evaluated relative to other larger, more complex, objectives and goals.

The courage required to pursue risk – to stare down danger – also enlarges the spirit. Courage is sometimes described as contagious once witnessed, and surely spreading courage is a good thing? In a recent article on extreme sports and mountain biking, the author states that risk-filled activities such as mountain biking are where “a mismanaged mistake or accident would most likely result in death” (Roberts, Jones & Brooks, 2018; see also Brymer, 2005; Brymer, 2010; Brymer, Cuddihy & Sharma-Brymer, 2010; Brymer & Oades, 2009; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2017). Yet, as the authors explain, regardless of their motivation and despite the risk inherent in their activity, “mountain bikers reported copious benefits to mental health and well-being related to their engagement. There was a high reported usage of mountain biking as a coping strategy” (Roberts, Jones & Brooks, 2018). According to Jeys et al., mountain biking carries a “significant risk of life-threatening injury across all levels of participation” (2001, p. 197). So perhaps, during Covid, it was the refusal to take risk into account, or even the desire to experience risk that motivated scores of Toronto mountain bikers to seek adventure in the city's forested ravines?

After all, if the Covid Cosmology sought more than anything to control the specific risk that was infection, then raw or overt risk-taking outside the environments managed by government and public health could have been one of the most precious rare experiences of the pandemic. Is there any wonder that regular old bicycling – an inherently risky activity, or at least one that offers the sensation of risk – was so popular? Is there any wonder why so many new mountain bikers – from young to old, wealthy to poor, male to female – sought solace via risk in Toronto's comparatively wild ravines and forests?



Fig. 16. Tree roots next to a Don Valley mountain bike trail (photo by author).

6. Concluding reflections

The Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to an unprecedented, coordinated global response from bureaucrats, politicians, and health representatives, the objective of which was to crush the virus and avoid all virus-related risks (illness from Covid-19, death, infection, etc.). This single-minded objective was implemented by viewing reality through to a narrow ontological framework that divided the world into controllable and identifiable black and white binaries – the Covid Cosmology.

This Covid Cosmology shrunk what was possible for the healthy majority during Covid-19. In the face of this restrictive ontology, healthy, vital, vibrant people in cities like Toronto sought out activities that allowed them to expand their skills, seek adventure, and engage with risk. Mountain biking in Toronto's Don Valley trail network was one such activity. During Covid the number of people cycling on the Don Valley's trails increased and the trail system itself expanded. What also expanded were the lives of those mountain bikers for whom lockdowns, restrictions, and masks were not the only option. For these adventure seekers, the Don Valley offered opportunities to grow, to commune with nature, and to connect with the wilderness, and to expand their horizons and communities.

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