ARTICLES

Our Ancient Forests: Virtual Visiting and Art for Conservation

Emma Morgan-Thorp

In the final days of 2020, one thing is keeping me together: snow. If I'm not up early enough, my dog Jack will come up to my side of the bed and, whining quietly, push his wet nose into my face. I'll slip out of bed, pulling tights, socks, and a sweatshirt out of my chest of drawers in the dim light, trying not to wake my partner. I'll go over my checklist (tea, leash, and collar and treats for Jack, car keys, driver's licence, phone, hiking boots . . .) while Jack dances around me. Soon we will be out the door, into the truck, and off through quiet neighbourhood streets, heading into the backcountry in search of snow. On lucky days, we'll find snow falling. Sometimes it takes a steep drive followed by a steep hike, starting in cold rain and striving upward until the frigid drops turn semi-solid and nest in our eyelashes. Other days it's a matter of driving until the snow is too deep for the truck to pass, then continuing uphill on foot, tossing snowballs for Jack to catch in his mouth. On weekdays, we won't go far at all and often won't find snow, taking solace instead in the penetrating damp of the Pacific rainforest and the thunderous rush of creeks and waterfalls. Every day, I am aware of how lucky I am; while so many people are stuck indoors, living in apartments and condos, or car-less and unable to risk subway and bus rides out of the city, I have this truck, its winter tires, these strong legs, and waterproof boots. This dog (along with a canister of bear spray and a knife tied to my backpack) allows me to feel safe on trails where I'm not likely to meet another human being. Once or twice a week, we meet a friend at the trailhead, and this is the only time I socialize in person with anyone other than my partner. I have always loved walking in the woods with my dog, but now, in the depths of a grey winter, after over nine months of Covid-19 restrictions, it is unquestionably the highlight of my days.

In what follows, I consider how virtual reality (VR) presents both opportunities and challenges for settlers seeking to develop deeper and more complex relationships with the more-than-human world and artists attempting to engage the public in environmental struggles. I do so by taking a close look at two virtual reality experiences in an exhibition about the need to save an ancient forest from the threat of logging. The *Our Ancient Forests* exhibition took place in November 2020 at the Sunshine Coast Arts Council (SCAC) gallery in Sechelt, BC, on shíshálh and Skwxwú7mesh territory, and featured work by a group of artists who had been taken on a walk through the nearby Dakota Bear Sanctuary. Two of the exhibition's works featured elements of virtual reality: one, *Tree Earth Sky,* invited the gallery visitor to don a VR headset and look around at the rainforest, including a peek at the mycelium belowground; the other, *Sanctuary: The Dakota Bear Ancient Forest Experience,* ushered the audience into a small geodesic dome for a 360° film tour of the Dakota Bear Sanctuary hosted by T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss, an interdisciplinary artist, ethnobotanist, activist, and member of the Squamish Nation who is of Skwxwu7mesh, Stó:lō, Métis, Hawaiian, and Swiss descent.[1]

I take up these two VR pieces in order to work through questions about the use of VR both as a means of visiting a wild place and as a means of moving audiences to environmentalist and anticolonial action. How can VR stand in for the experience of being in an ancient forest? Without physical presence and embodied sensorial experience, how can an individual experience the sense of

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reciprocity that lies at the heart of ethical relationships with the more-than-human world? In tackling these questions, I turn to the work of Danis Goulet and Lisa Jackson to learn about some of the anticolonial innovations that Indigenous VR artists have brought to the medium. I also consider the risk of nonperformativity in art that seeks to spark empathy: the possibility that the experience of the art will provide a kind of catharsis that forecloses upon the possibility of action. This work is informed by the thinking of Lisa Nakamura and Sita Popat, who theorize about the capacities, limitations, and ethics of VR. I have also included some of my own experiments in performative writing: autoethnographic accounts of my encounters with wild spaces and more-than-human beings where I live on Tla'amin territory and through my virtual encounters with wild spaces via VR. In researching and writing this piece, I have come to better understand the complexity of the desire to commune with ancient forests and their inhabitants, the importance of challenging our own acquisitive and extractive desires, and the potential that virtual reality holds for helping us understand when our physical presence may be more detrimental than beneficial.

On Positionality and Apposite Methodology

In thinking about virtually visiting with ancient forests and walking as a method for interrogating relationships between humans, wild spaces, and more-than-human beings, I have based my reflections on my experiences as a settler on Tla'amin territory and visitor to shíshálh and Skwxwú7mesh territory during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a settler writing about anticolonial environmentalisms, I take direction from Métis scholar and artist David Garneau's writing on irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality and parallel spaces for settlers to figure things out on their own, and, in particular, the ways in which these concepts are taken up by xwélméxw (Stó:lō) musicologist Dylan Robinson.[2] Settlers opposed to colonialism may understand that there are a number of things required of us in the project of environmental anticolonialism, such as supporting Land Back movements and Indigenous land protectors, insisting that consultation rights are honoured, and calling upon our elected officials to fulfil their obligations under UNDRIP and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report.[3] However, it is also necessary for us to examine our complicity in ongoing colonial processes beyond our presence on the land and to interrogate our relationships with the more-than-human world. These interrogations may yield opportunities for us to divest ourselves of some colonial influence. This challenge will also require us to think through how we can relate to the land in non- (or less) colonizing ways without appropriating Indigenous worldviews or forms of relationality. Community-facing art and performance present one strategy for taking on this task. These accessible artistic modes may engage a broad range of people with diverse relationships to the environment, including, but not limited to, those already committed to environmentalism. There is a great deal to be done from within environmental movements to subvert white supremacy and colonialism. Meanwhile, from within communities deeply invested in—and perhaps not at all critical of—extractivism, there may be more complex relationships with the more-than-human world than one might at first imagine.

For these reasons, I am interested in the human craving for interconnectivity, reciprocity, and understanding with plants: a sense that there is a familiarity, give and take, even friendship with members of the more-than-human world, particularly in beautiful wild places that feel somehow outside the human realm. This desire may be a reaction to the selfish, anthropocentric, and extractive approach to "resources" that settler colonialism takes in North America. However, it may also involve an equally extractive desire to know, to possess, that has much in common with the forms of perception that Dylan Robinson calls "hungry listening" (2020, 2). I wonder if the human

longing for interrelationality also contains an opportunity for more ethical engagements with the nonhuman members of our immediate communities and whether we may be more open to this type of relationship during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The choice to include autoethnographic accounts of walking in this academic paper follows Dylan Robinson's call for apposite methodology. As he describes them in *Hungry Listening,* "apposite methodologies are processes for conveying experience alongside subjectivity and alterity; they are forms of what is sometimes referred to as 'writing with' a subject in contrast to 'writing about'" (2020, 81). In an online workshop in February 2021, Robinson emphasized the importance of an apposite methodology that is particularly attentive to form, reminding participants to be considerate about the frameworks we use to approach our topics. He asked participants to consider the aesthetic choices that we make when deciding how to be in relation to our own thoughts and the subjects of our thinking (2021). Robinson himself turns to poetry throughout *Hungry Listening*; I have chosen autoethnography. I have done so for three primary reasons. First, it compels me to be up front and thoughtful about my own positionality and context, which prompts me to remember that my viewpoint is just one of many ways of seeing the world, one that is particularly privileged in many ways while also being limited by my identity, context, and experience. Second, it permits me to pay particular attention to my sensory and embodied experiences and to consider the sensory and embodied experiences of those around me. This opens my eyes to the many ways in which I am in a reciprocal relationship with the world around me and am not only perceiving but also being perceived. Thirdly, the use of thick description draws me out of more rigid academic writing and into a way of noticing, reflecting, and writing that is more intimate, more artistic, more personal, and more accessible. When I am writing autoethnographic thick description, I am putting to use the critical mind that academia has trained but doing so as a breathing, feeling member of an ecosystem and a community.

Our Ancient Forests: A Virtual Walk and the Cultivation of Empathy

On November 14, 2020, the Sunshine Coast Arts Council (SCAC) hosted an online conversation, "Artists in Dialogue with Our Ancient Forests," in which artists who contributed to the *Our Ancient Forests* exhibition at the SCAC discussed their experience visiting the Dakota Bear Sanctuary and the work they subsequently produced about that experience. Gallery director and curator Sadira Rodrigues opened the session with the following welcome: "As a means of acknowledging the responsibility of living and working and playing on the traditional territories of the Sechelt and the unceded territories of the Squamish people, I feel that the exhibition, in many ways, and this kind of dialogue, is part of the responsibility that we hold at the Sunshine Coast Arts Council to enact a different set of relations between individuals and between the land and between our institutions. And so, to me, the exhibition is our territorial acknowledgement of the responsibility that's enacted, to be able to live in these tremendous places" (Rodrigues 2020). The visit to the Dakota Bear Sanctuary, often referred to in the exhibition as The Sanctuary, was coordinated by Vancouver-based arts organization The Only Animal, whose stated mission is to "change the world through creative disruption" (2020), along with the Living Forest Institute and Elphinstone Logging Focus.[4] Living Forest Institute (LFI) works toward preservation of surviving "natural forests" by connecting members of local communities with them, stating: "We believe that our remaining natural forests are integral components of the local communities in which they exist, and play an essential role in the well-being of the planet. We promote this belief through collaboration with environmental, First Nations, political, educational, artistic, cultural, and other organizations to produce art and

educational activities that develop stronger connections between community members and local natural forests. In our effort to inspire action and preservation, our focus is on education, inspiration, and activism" (2020). Elphinstone Logging Focus (ELF) is a BC nonprofit created to keep the public informed about potential logging threats to "important" forest lands. On their site, they clarify the meaning of "important" in their mission statement: "ELF is not opposed to 'harvesting' of second growth forests using partial-cut techniques, however is opposed to industrial style logging and seeks a ban on clear-cut logging since it destroys eco-systems" (Elphinstone Logging Focus 2020). They further state that their mission is to "protect key forests and habitat in order to conserve ecosystems and support recreation, tourism, and community resilience" (2020).

Our Ancient Forests saw the stated goals of these organizations—to enact a different set of relations between individuals, the land, and institutions; to create change through creative disruption; to inspire action and preservation through education, inspiration, and activism; and to protect key forests and habitat—coalescing in the creation of a multimedia exhibition on Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and shíshálh (Sechelt) territory. I visited the exhibition at the SCAC gallery space after listening in on the artists' discussion via Zoom. I came away with an appreciation of both the thought and the artistic work that had gone into the exhibition's creation. I also had questions as to the efficacy of arts-based interventions to spark community engagement and meaningful change in logging practices and conservation.

Certain components of the exhibition have enjoyed public engagement outside of the SCAC's *Our Ancient Forests* exhibition in Sechelt. The Wild Empathy Project's *Tree Earth Sky,* a virtual reality experience that employs the more recognizable VR apparatus of the headset, has been available to visitors at Science World.[5] *Sanctuary: The Dakota Bear Ancient Forest Experience*, a 360° video installation created by T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss, Damien Gillis, and Olivier Leroux, sold out all presentations at Vancouver's PuSh festival between February 3rd and 7th, 2021 (PuSh 2021). The festival's webpage for the presentation describes it as "an ecological adventure—a feast for the senses, and an implicit call to action" (PuSh 2021). *Sanctuary* ushers viewers—one or two at a time, due to Covid-19 safety restrictions—into a geodesic dome just large enough for a bench and the viewers; onto the dome are projected the enormous mossy trees and undergrowth of the Dakota Bear Sanctuary while birds call out and T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss leads audience members through an explanation of why this place is so important to protect. Creator Damien Gillis has been quoted as saying, "I felt we needed a visceral experience to take viewers as close as we can to being in that place," while the PuSh description touts it as offering "the thrill of true immersion" (PuSh 2021). The same site promises that the experience of *Sanctuary* "will bring you to a new understanding, and a new sense of urgency" (PuSh 2021). Visceral, immersive? Absolutely. Beautiful and moving? Yes. I found myself wondering, though, as I made my way back up the Sunshine Coast from Sechelt to my home in Powell River whether it would indeed bring its audiences new understanding and, even if it did, whether the sense of urgency it inspires would motivate action as its creators hoped.

Damien Gillis, Cease Wyss, and Olivier Leroux, *Sanctuary: The Dakota Bear Ancient Forest Experience*. Sunshine Coast Arts Council, Sechelt BC, November 2020. Used with permission of Damien Gillis.

I haven't been to the Dakota Bear Sanctuary though I drive past it every time I make my way to Vancouver. Despite its relative proximity to huge human populations, not many people visit the Sanctuary. Unlike the nearby ecotourism destinations of the Sunshine Coast Trail, Suncoaster Trail, and Tetrahedron Provincial Park, the Dakota Creek watershed region has not been marketed to tourists and contains no network of formal hiking trails. In fact, this is an essential element of its importance as home to crucial black bear habitat as well as potentially some of this country's oldest trees (Lavoie 2020). In a short film shot by Trent Maynard on location in Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw, unceded Squamish territories, bear biologist Wayne McCrory explains that the Dakota Bear Sanctuary is home to a concentration of black bear dens, probably due to the intensity of logging in the surrounding area (Maynard 2021).[6] If the Sanctuary is logged too, there will be nowhere left for these bears to hibernate.

Unfortunately, the Sanctuary—known in the context of government and resource extraction as Block A87126 (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh 2021)—was until recently up for auction to be logged. The Elphinstone Logging Focus website, which is kept carefully up to date on all developments, reported in September 2020 that Block A87126 had been removed from the action list for harvest by BC Timber Sales (BCTS), a deferral of at least one year (Elphinstone Logging Focus 2020). BC Timber Sales is responsible for one-fifth of the province's annual allowable logging and, despite its claims of sustainable harvest, has a history of untrustworthy activity when it comes to logging old growth trees (Lavoie 2019). Ross Muirhead of ELF suggested that the Dakota Bear Sanctuary may be the most deferred block in the province's history: "The government and BCTS can't come to terms with the fact that destroying an ancient forest with rare overlapping natural and cultural values would be an environmental crime" (quoted in Elphinstone Logging Focus 2020). Muirhead and his allies, including the artists who participated in the SCAC's *Our Ancient Forests* exhibition, are advocating for the Sanctuary to be permanently protected. Given that all activity by BC Timber Sales is conducted

by the provincial government elected to represent us, these atrocities are being committed in our—British Columbians'—names (Wilderness Committee 2020). None of this information is difficult to come by. And yet, our communities' artists are in a position to be making work that pleads with the public to advocate for the Sanctuary and other places like it. Why is it that we need them to convince us to be moved to feel empathy for these black bears and the other inhabitants of the Sanctuary? And, when they are successful in provoking our compassion, do we then take action?

The exhibition at the SCAC and, to an even greater degree, *Sanctuary*'s inclusion in PuSh, allowed the public to access a place that they would likely never visit. Even for those of us lucky enough to walk in the rainforest regularly or even sit at the foot of old growth trees and breathe their oxygen, it is an honour to enter the Dakota Bear Sanctuary, albeit virtually. And yet, there is surely a marked difference between experiencing a place in person and having it shown to you via (immersive, 360°, visceral, but nevertheless constructed, narrated, and edited) film. In thinking about the effectiveness of *Sanctuary* and the other pieces featured in the *Our Ancient Forests* exhibition, I wondered: Are the people who choose to view the exhibition and the film learning much that they did not know before? Even if they are, are their paradigms being shifted or are most people who choose to attend these exhibitions already opposed to old growth logging and ecosystem destruction? Even if their opinions about logging, or old growth logging, or even just logging in this particular place are changed by the art they encounter, will they be moved to act? The savvy curators and artists engaged in this campaign have offered many easy opportunities to speak up for the protection of the Dakota Bear Sanctuary, from an online Citizen Action Kit to prewritten, prestamped letters visitors to the SCAC exhibition could sign.[7] But will this be enough? Is greater commitment from the public needed? Can art solicit this kind of engagement? More particularly, can art be as effective as allowing people to visit the place themselves?

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I enter the gallery. It's my second time here, and I am once again overcome by the beauty of the room, its white walls hung with photographs of ancient trees, its heavy beams and wooden ceiling creating the sense of being in a forest, the sun pouring in through a massive skylight in the ceiling's centre. To my right, through a curtain, I can hear drumming, singing, and, over this, voices murmuring. Ahead of me, the room opens up to framed photographs, carvings, and installations. A woman sits at a small bench with a VR headset and a bottle of sanitizer. I turn to my left and read the artists' statement. "What role does art have in saving our ancient forests? How can artistic practice transform how we collectively understand the irreplaceable value of the last stands of ancient forests that remain, not just on the Sunshine Coast, but throughout British Columbia?" (Our Ancient Forests 2020). I raise my phone to take a photograph, hesitate, turn to the woman at the VR station, ask permission. Yes, she says. Having read and photographed the artists' statement, I move forward into the space of the exhibition.

<p align="center">*</p>

I enter the woods. The morning is cold, and the invasive Himalayan blackberry and ivy at the entrance to the trail glisten with silvery frost. I have walked this trail many times, and I am once again overcome by its beauty. To my right, down at the beach, I can hear the sea lions barking. To my left, traffic noises through the trees. A raven croaks, and I look around for it, hoping to catch a glimpse, knowing that if my dog sees it first, he will give chase. My pulse rises a bit at the threat of having to restrain him, and I wrap the leash more tightly around my hand. As we make our way along the trail, we pause for Jack to sniff and pee. I notice a fallen stick decorated with hair ice, its long, silky strands curling delicately away from the wood. Evidence of the presence of the fungus Exidiopsis effusa, *I remember. As we continue walking, my body warms from the exertion, though my nose and ears stay cold. The forest smells*

wonderful today: cedar and soil and salt air rising up to meet my nose as the ground gradually thaws. I am writing this description in my head as I walk and, head bowed to my phone to make a note, I don't notice a jogger approaching. My heart jumps as I race to restrain Jack, suddenly barking at this unexpectedly fast movement past us. I apologize, smile, we make our way in the opposite direction. I flex my fingers and feel the blood flowing through them, take measured breaths, enjoy the cool air as it enters my lungs.

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I take my place at the low, wooden bench and accept the VR headset passed to me by the gallery attendant. Tree Earth Sky *begins underground in a sparkling animation that evokes the mycorrhizal network and its exchanges of nutrients among the roots of ancient trees. I turn to look over my shoulder: I am surrounded by the bustling energy of microscopic organisms which link the trees, plants, and fungi that reach above the forest floor. The VR experience shoots me up, plantlike, above the soil's surface and allows me to look around at a bright old growth grove. I crane my neck, feeling the headset heavy on my nose and forehead, to look up at the boughs that reach toward the sky.*
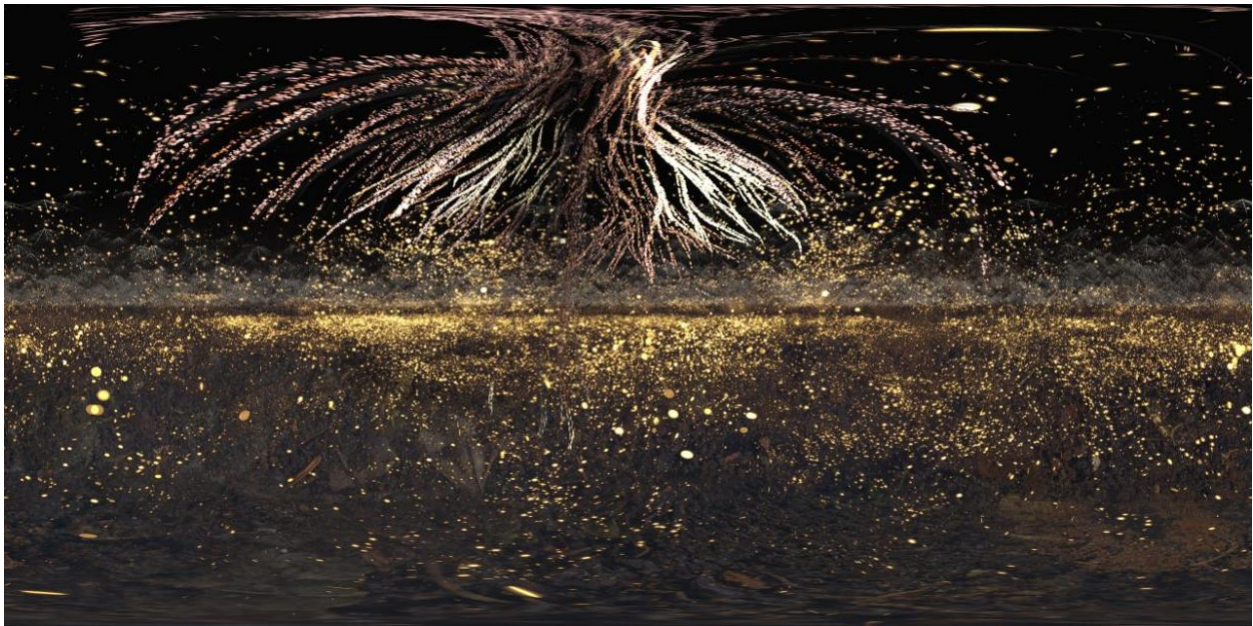
The Wild Empathy Project. *Tree Earth Sky*. Sunshine Coast Arts Council, Sechelt BC, November 2020. Used with permission of Julie Andreyev.

In the time it has taken me to explore the gallery, the other few patrons have left. My last stop will be inside the curtained area that's home to the immersive Sanctuary *installation. In the video, Squamish Nation member T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss welcomes me and guides me among massive cedars, telling me about this special place. We climb into a bear den in a hollow tree, and I try to imagine how it must smell when the bear is sheltering there, its musk and warmth. I feel like an interloper here, in someone else's home, and I do experience a sensory echo of the tight space, find myself imagining the moist, crumbling bark against my skin. I feel honoured to be in this space. Wyss also takes me to a clear-cut and asks me to imagine this fate for the ancient, vital Dakota watershed; again, I am moved: I worry, I feel myself becoming angry. Lastly, I am permitted to witness a traditional song and begin, perhaps, to understand why Wyss refers to her activist artistic work as "ceremonial activism" (Derdeyn 2021). It is in this moment that I reflect on how my perceptions of beautiful old growth spaces like the Sanctuary may differ from those of the people whose families have lived on this territory for many generations. The drumming carries me back out from under the dome, through the curtain, and into the bright light of the gallery. I cast another look around me at the*

masks, photographs, and installations I've spent the afternoon inspecting, but I do not linger. I thank the attendant and let my feet carry me back to my truck. I drive until I'm in the forest, and then I begin to walk.

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An article by Dorothy Woodend in the *Tyee* titled "Exploring an Ancient BC Forest, Before It's Too Late" opens: "One day, the only trace of old-growth forests might be virtual replicas. The trees, plants, streams and animals all rendered in pixels and projections, a ghost version of something that was once wildly alive" (2021). As Woodend suggests, the virtual visits to the Dakota Bear Sanctuary carry within them the spectre of a dystopic future wherein our only vestige of these wild and ancient places is through the memory of film. The notion of archival footage and the ability to access a virtual experience of rainforests would be cold comfort, of course, for the species who make their homes there today. Woodend also writes that the film "offers a remarkable immersion, akin to the practice of forest bathing" (2021). She further notes the importance of the sound design, which features the music of birds and moving water, and adds, "Cedar boughs add another sensorial quality, recreating the sight, sound and smell of the forest" (2021). And yet, we are not in the forest, and the recreation is not complete. Although the creators of *Sanctuary* have shared something truly beautiful and arguably very powerful, we cannot feel the cool damp of the rainforest on our skin, nor the prickle of fear (of predators, primarily, though some fear poisonous plants, bugs, getting lost) that undergirds the awe and respect of walking through the rainforest. Despite painstaking and heartfelt work on the part of the artists, virtual reality simply cannot replicate the experience of visiting the places it portrays. While this does not mean that the art will not still have powerful effects on those who experience it, it may have ramifications for its touted role as an extractor of empathy from our—the public's—technology- and media-saturated psyches.

In "Feeling Good about Feeling Bad: Virtuous Virtual Reality and the Automation of Racial Empathy," Lisa Nakamura describes how the first stage of VR development (VR 1.0) focused on helping people experience parts of the world that were inaccessible to them by placing them in a virtual approximation of those places or situations. One example of this is a VR experiment from the 1990s called Virtual Gorilla, which allowed the user to experience the perspective of an adolescent gorilla. "The kind of empathy envisioned here is about learning about the non-human through visual re-embodiment," Nakamura writes (51). In other words, the creators wanted to show users what it's like to be a gorilla. VR 2.0 (post-acquisition by Facebook in 2014), on the other hand, has been styled and marketed as an ethical technology, intended to create compassion and empathy through instruction about morality. While VR 1.0 was more about curiosity and access to the wondrous, VR 2.0 has been constructed as what producer Chris Milk calls an "empathy machine" (Milk 2015). The distinction is in the use and framing of the product rather than the tech itself. As Nakamura explains, "both early VR's empathic learning and VR 2.0's empathic feeling are founded on the concept of toxic re-embodiment: occupying the body of another who might not even own their own body" (2020, 51). Nakamura shares the disturbing example of documentary VR that is *One Dark Night* (2015), which makes the user a witness to Trayvon Martin's murder (51). While one might imagine the potential misapprehensions and negative effects of thinking one understands what it's like to be a gorilla, the reproduction of fatal violence against a Black teenager takes the use of VR—a technology sold for entertainment as well as moral education—to a new level, where it is clearly exploitative, inarguably toxic.

How, then, should we understand the use of VR to encourage the development of compassion for endangered wild places? If we are re-embodied in The Wild Empathy Project's *Tree Earth Sky*, what

kind of body do we virtually inhabit, whose vantage point do we assume, and to what kind of information do we understand ourselves to have gained access? In *Sanctuary*'s geodesic dome, we appear to remain ourselves, tourists on a guided walk; *Tree Earth Sky* leaves us no such familiarity. Underground, we might be micro-organisms. We might be energy itself. While Nakamura's work is useful to an analysis of *Sanctuary* and *Tree Earth Sky* in terms of understanding VR, its history, and some of its pitfalls, it is worth noting here that Nakamura focuses primarily on race and that the bulk of VR as she describes it in this article is about people. More specifically, it is a way for primarily white, nondisabled males to access the perspectives of and gain insight into the lives of less privileged people. There are crucial differences in the use of VR to access a "wild" space, a predominantly nonhuman space. The Wild Empathy Project has chosen not to try to give us the experience of inhabiting the perspective of a bear or tree or even a specific person or character. Rather, *Tree Earth Sky* and *Sanctuary* transport us to a place that is inaccessible to us. Toxic embodiment may not be a factor here: instead, we are granted access to a place we'd likely never otherwise visit. But is there, even then, a risk—like the one Nakamura describes—of experiencing an emotional connection *rather than,* instead of *and then*, taking action? What are the ramifications of being able to look around this place without physically placing oneself there? What kinds of reciprocity, intersubjectivity, and relationality may be missing in the VR experience?

In October 2020, the Indigenous Connections Working Group of the Doctoral Student Association at the University of Toronto offered a presentation titled "Decolonizing Virtual Reality" via Zoom. The presentation featured Dr. Jennifer Wemigwans (Anishinaabekew) in conversation with VR filmmakers Nyla Innuksuk (Inuk), Danis Goulet (Cree/Metis), and Lisa Jackson (Anishinaabekew), who spoke about their work and their relationship with the medium. During the talk, Goulet raised the question of the identity of the viewer, which she explained is central to every VR project (Wemigwans et al. 2020). When we are brought into the intimate space of the virtual reality being offered and our perception is centred in that experience, it is important to take stock of who is doing the looking. And yet, this component of the experience is often elided in favour of prioritizing that which is viewed: the space (and, often, people) to which the VR user has gained access (Wemigwans et al. 2020). Jackson later shared a story that cast some light upon this issue. She described directing a 360° video about the Highway of Tears for CBC's *The Current,* featuring Matilda Wilson, a long-time advocate for Indigenous women who frequently go missing along Highway 16, which connects Prince George and Prince Rupert (Goldhar and Bloch 2016). Jackson talked about the importance of how Wilson's story was communicated to the audience. She wanted to avoid the fly-on-the-wall anonymity often furnished by virtual reality, which allows viewers to escape accountability. To avoid giving audiences a voyeuristic experience, she chose to film the interview in Wilson's home and to ask her to look directly into the camera: "So there was a sense for people watching that they were sitting in her home, on her territory, and she was speaking straight to them. There was a kind of accountability, an agency there, and her agency felt a little stronger: she was in control of her story. It was important for people to feel that they were a guest in her home" (Wemigwans et al. 2020). Jackson also talked about how, in all of her work, she strives to create environments that do not tell her audiences how to feel. She described how this approach tends to move people to bring their own contexts and histories to the experience of watching a film or using VR, which can be very uncomfortable for them but also offers the opportunity to engage more deeply with the content, implicating themselves, making decisions as to how they interpret it, and truly grappling with the questions it raises. This approach certainly contrasts with the more prescriptive—and arguably exploitative—virtual reality experiences designed by some of the producers Nakamura describes, which purport to offer an empathetic experience but rather offer voyeuristic identity tourism to privileged participants without requiring their active participation or offering agency to the subjects

of the experiences (2020). Jackson's anticolonial approach to virtual reality offers insight into how VR can be mobilized in more ethical ways than those developed by Milk and similar creators.

In my efforts to think through the efficacies and drawbacks of virtual reality, I posit that under the twin shadows of anthropogenic climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, many human beings may be experiencing a renewed desire for relationship and interconnectivity with wild or natural spaces. As we act on our desire to build relationships with the more-than-human world, it is important that we try to do so in a reciprocal way and that we interrogate greedy, possessive, or extractive impulses that may arise in us. In order to do this careful work, we will need to reflect upon our positionality, the contexts that motivate us, and the possible effects of enacting our desires upon places and more-than-human beings. The *Our Ancient Forests* exhibition invites us to think about how we might love a place and develop deep empathy, compassion, and care for it without needing to leave our footprints there. Although we will miss out on the full sensory experience of presence and may risk losing sight of our interrelationality with the place, if we are not there in an embodied sense, there is a possibility that virtual visits, whether through the technology of virtual reality or feeling transported by other forms of art, can still inspire a felt connection in us. In my opinion, what is missing when we are not *in place* is the reciprocal bond, felt not just by us humans but also by the place and its other inhabitants. But what virtual reality forces us to consider is that our physical absence from some spaces may, in some cases, have more positive than negative effects.

While VR circumvents physical reciprocity with one's environs and the full potential for multisensoriality, it does not foreclose upon all possibilities for an embodied experience. In "Missing in Action: Embodied Experience and Virtual Reality," Sita Popat writes about the possibility of feeling embodied during VR experiences despite the technology's tendency to alienate users from their physical selves (2016). Popat describes her virtual experience of crashing into a cliff face in a hot air balloon in a performance installation called *White Island*: although she knew that she would not be hurt, she still flung her arms up in front of her face to protect herself (2016, 5). Popat's experience understandably yielded a greater adrenaline rush than my relatively calm few moments sitting in a bear den in a hollow tree. Due to the nature of our respective VR experiences—she wore an Oculus Rift headset and could only see the virtual world all around her, while I was seated on a bench inside the Sanctuary geodesic dome and could look down to see my own body and the gallery floor—we experienced different levels of immersion. Still, we both experienced degrees of proprioception: Popat expected to see her arms where she had held them up before her face to shield her from the oncoming cliff (5) while I felt my shoulders narrow as I instinctively made myself small enough to fit inside the bear den. Popat describes proprioception as a sixth sense, "encompassing internal connectivity, spatiality, and movement," which allows for "new ways of knowing (in) the world" (7, 8). Our embodied responses to the data our respective VR experiences gave us—bracing for impact, tightening into a smaller space—demonstrate that this sixth sense was at work within us both despite the stark differences in scenarios and technologies. Popat's work allows me to understand that while there are many differences between physically visiting the Dakota Bear Sanctuary and visiting it virtually, it is overly simplistic to suggest that VR cannot facilitate some kind of embodied experience within the virtual version of the old growth forest. In fact, Popat (with reference to *Virtual Art* author Oliver Grau) describes virtual reality as "a space in which to do the undoable, to rehearse the unrehearsable," further noting that "in this space we might begin to access alternative embodied experiences to expand our individual perspectives" (12).

Popat refers to her "blurred body" as inhabiting a space between the physical and the virtual while participating in *White Island* and states that this position allowed both binary points to become permeable in her embodied experience within the installation (2016, 13, 14). She says, "This allowed me to do the undoable by drawing on and extrapolating from bodily memories in order to color my interactions with the virtual world" (14). Her body remembered impact and reacted as though impact with the oncoming cliff would not be virtual, just as my body remembered slipping into a narrow space and translated that bodily memory onto my virtual experience. As Popat puts it: "My body was not fooled, but my perception of the virtual experience was deeply informed by my embodied knowledge of being in the world" (14). Further research about how these types of proprioceptive semi-embodied experiences of wild spaces via virtual reality may affect our individual perspectives (which is to say, audiences' empathetic engagement with old growth ecosystems, not to mention their likelihood of taking action for old growth protection) lies outside the scope of this paper but presents an alluring avenue for future study.

Update: Victories—And the Fight Continues

While editing this piece for publication in February 2021, I learned of an exciting update in the story of the Dakota Bear Sanctuary: the Squamish Nation and the BC government had reached an agreement on the protection of the land (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh 2021). TSL A87126, the Dakota watershed area, was off the auction table and had been removed from the BC Timber Sales operating plan. The agreement recognized the cultural importance of the area and the province's commitment to reconciliation, stating that the Nation and the BC government would work together to find a land use designation (such as an Old Growth Management Area, Wildlife Habitat Area, or Squamish Nation Area of Interest) that restricts development and harvesting there (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh 2021). On June 10, 2021, a further development emerged: the Squamish Nation announced a moratorium on all old growth logging on their territory (Squamish Nation 2021). This moratorium takes the form of a two-year deferral on old growth logging while the Nation updates its 2001 Xay Temixw Land Use Plan. The press release notes that 78,000 hectares of old growth on Squamish territory are currently at risk of logging, and that these forests have never been ceded by the Squamish people (Squamish Nation 2021).

The province has an extremely poor record when it comes to honouring its commitments to protect old growth (MacLeod 2021). In 2019, the BC government commissioned professional foresters Garry Merkel (Tahtlan Nation) and Al Gorley to create an in-depth strategic review of BC's old growth forest management practices. Their report, "A New Future for Old Forests," highlighted twelve recommendations, two of which were classified as "immediate responses" (Gorley and Merkel 2020). These include recommendation six: "Until a new strategy is implemented, defer development in old forests where ecosystems are at very high and near-term risk of irreversible biodiversity loss" (Gorley and Merkel 2020, 55). Despite this recommendation, the provincial government continues to log old growth in at-risk areas. In fact, in Ada'itsx, the Fairy Creek watershed on Pacheedaht and Dididaht territories, land defenders have been blockading against old growth logging since August 2020 (Rainforest Flying Squad 2021).

While we can celebrate the Squamish Nation's successes and our relief that the crucial bear habitat in the Dakota watershed is presently safe from logging, settlers must continue to support Indigenous land protectors in their work to assert their sovereignty and defend the more-than-human world elsewhere in our province. We must hold our colonial provincial government accountable for its

promises about old growth protection and the rights of Indigenous peoples. And we must try to understand, untangle, and decolonize our own relationships with the lands we live on and their more-than-human inhabitants.

Art's Role in Saving Our Ancient Forests

The Our Ancient Forests artists' statement asked, "What role does art have in saving our ancient forests? How can artistic practice transform how we collectively understand the irreplaceable value of the last stands of ancient forests that remain, not just on the Sunshine Coast, but throughout British Columbia?" (Our Ancient Forests 2020). What role did art have in saving this ecosystem, this habitat, these ancient trees? It's hard to quantify. Curator Sadira Rodrigues told me that 185 completed letters were taken from the Our Ancient Forests exhibition and mailed to provincial decision-makers by the Living Forest Institute (Rodrigues, personal communication, July 12, 2021). It seems likely that the Squamish Nation was empowered to make their definitive declaration about old growth logging on their territory because the narrative here in BC about Indigenous sovereignty and extractivism is changing, in no small part because these topics have been brought centre stage by the activities in the Fairy Creek watershed.

What role did art have in saving the Sanctuary? This question has been overshadowed by the roles that direct action, protest, and public discourse have played. That said, there's more to the artists' statement: "How can artistic practice transform how we collectively understand the irreplaceable value of the last stands of ancient forests that remain?" (Our Ancient Forests 2020). Note that the 360° VR experience centred Indigenous leadership and relationships with place. The ceremonial drumming and singing constituted a crucial element of the piece. This is one way that the experience may have transformed settler audience members' understandings of the irreplaceable value of the Sanctuary. While settlers inclined to protect ancient forests may have been more likely to visit the exhibition than those inclined to log them, there may not have been a clear understanding of Indigenous perspectives among all visitors. Let us recall what Lisa Jackson said about how she chose to represent her subject in her VR project: "There was a kind of accountability, an agency there, and her agency felt a little stronger: she was in control of her story. It was important for people to feel that they were a guest in her home" (Wemigwans et al. 2020). One crucial way that the Sanctuary VR experience may transform the public's collective understanding of the fight to save ancient forests is by giving non-Indigenous members of the public a clear and emotional understanding that we are guests in someone else's home: that of the Squamish Nation and that of the territory's more-than-human inhabitants. Jackson also said that across her oeuvre, she avoids prescriptive strategies in favour of allowing audiences to bring their own experiences to her work and figure out for themselves how to interpret it subjectively (Wemigwans et al.). According to Jackson, this allows viewers or participants to implicate themselves in the story being told, which brings us to the crux of this question about VR as an empathy machine. Even as the work moves us to empathy, does it move us to action? I believe this to be far more likely if we feel implicated.

The use of virtual reality in the *Sanctuary* and *Tree Earth Sky* installations is important because it allows participants to "visit" the Dakota Bear Sanctuary without actually imposing themselves physically upon the space. Yes, this forecloses on the possibility for the kind of reciprocal experience we may yearn for, in which we feel the ancient forest with our many modes of sensory perception and in which we feel felt by the ecosystem and its more-than-human inhabitants. And yes, the

understanding of reciprocity sparked by this feeling of physical presence and embodiment can hold us accountable for our actions and their consequences upon more-than-human communities. However, we can understand that in some contexts (for instance, critical bear habitat and an ancient old growth ecosystem), the best course of action may be to stay away. This is where art can give us a glimpse of places we may wish we could visit and give us insight into what life there is like. *Sanctuary* and *Tree Earth Sky* are offerings through which we can experience visiting (with) this sacred old growth ecosystem, and the hope is that they may prompt us to act on its behalf. Indeed, we may learn things through the artists' eyes—for instance, about the relationship members of the Squamish Nation have with this place or what it's like among the microorganisms below the surface of the soil—that we would not learn from visiting ourselves. Settler art audiences and organizations have an opportunity to support the Squamish Nation's efforts to protect the Dakota Bear Sanctuary, and we are reminded of this opportunity—and responsibility—when we interact with these VR installations. To support the Nation's work to protect the Sanctuary (and now all old growth on their territory) is to support their sovereignty. We can acknowledge that the settler desire for connectivity with the more-than-human world may drive our willingness to be moved to environmentalist and anticolonial action by art while remaining wary of our own extractivist "hunger" to go everywhere, see everything, understand everything, experience everything. We can perhaps deny that hunger by accepting that our visits to places like the Dakota Bear Sanctuary need to remain virtual sometimes and take up the challenge to act for their protection anyway.

Notes

1. A video version of the *Tree Earth Sky* VR experience is available at https://vimeo.com/516807205.

2. From *Hungry Listening*: "Garneau's concept of irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality . . . acts as a corrective to . . . assertions that decolonization must necessarily proceed through multicultural and intersectional dialogue. According to Garneau, such irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality are built from the premise that, 'while decolonization and Indigenization is collective work, it sometimes requires occasions of separation—moments where Indigenous people take space and time to work things out among themselves, and parallel moments when allies ought to do the same'" (Garneau 2016, 23, quoted in Robinson 2020, 235).

3. See the Unist'ot'en Camp (https://unistoten.camp/) and the Treaty 8 First Nations' efforts to block the Site C dam through the courts (https://westmo.org/news/press-release-treaty-8-first-nations-head-court).

4. Vancouver lies on the traditional, unceded territory of the Musqueam (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm), Squamish (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh), and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. The Only Animal is a theatre company practising creative disruption, often through intimate, site-specific theatre. Their work addresses environmental issues, climate change, and the natural world.

5. More information about The Wild Empathy can be found on their website: https://www.wildempathy.org/.

6. Shot on location in the Dakota watershed, Maynard's short film, *Ancient Wonders of the Dakota Bear Sanctuary*, features interviews with elder Xwechtaal Dennis Joseph, Elphinstone Logging Focus members Hans Penner and Ross Muirhead, bear biologist Wayne McCrory, UBC geographer Dr. Nina Hewitt, and Sierra Club campaigner Jens Wieting.

7. The Citizen Action Kit is accessible at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SJdATCSQHxjBsbrQIKta1D8QJRTV7q-slw4SFgCEfTk/edit.

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