“Unsettling” the Picturing of the Canadian Old-Growth Forest: Consent, Consultation, and (Re)conciliation in Leila Sujir’s *Forest!*

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The forest

In June 2016, South Asian-Canadian artist Leila Sujir[1] ventured into the coastal forests of the South Walbran Valley on Vancouver Island (British Columbia, Canada) to shoot footage in 3D stereoscopic video with an IMAX mirror rig and two Sony F65 cameras. Accompanied by cinematographer Chris Kroitor, Sujir planned to capture footage that showed the old-growth forests as expansive living entities. Her goal was to create an immersive aesthetic experience of the forest in the form of a large-scale video installation, and to elaborate on the visual effects produced by stereoscopic video, which the artist describes as “elastic space.”[2] The artist’s presence in the small coastal village of Port Renfrew, her base while shooting, soon invited the interest of local community members, including loggers, forestry ecologists, environmentalists, and members of the local Chamber of Commerce. By way of these informal meetings and conversations, Sujir established a network of community support that enabled the project to go forward.[3]

1 Leila Sujir was born in Hyderabad, India, in 1951 and immigrated to Canada as a child. She is currently Chair of the Studio Arts Department at Concordia University (Montreal, Canada) and Associate Professor in the area of Intermedia (Video, Performance, and Electronic Art).

2 “Elastic space” refers to the “elastic” quality of the projected stereoscopic video image as the viewer moves around the gallery space in relation to it. Leila Sujir, conversation with author, January 22, 2021. For an example, see “JTS Leila Sujir Forest Gif,” accessed 23 February 2021, https://www.elasticspaces.hexagram.ca/journal-of-transcultural-studies_sujir/.

3 See also Nancy Tousley, “Leila Sujir’s Forest of Pixels,” in *Intertwined Histories: Plants in Their Social Contexts,* ed. Jim Ellis (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2019), 112–123.

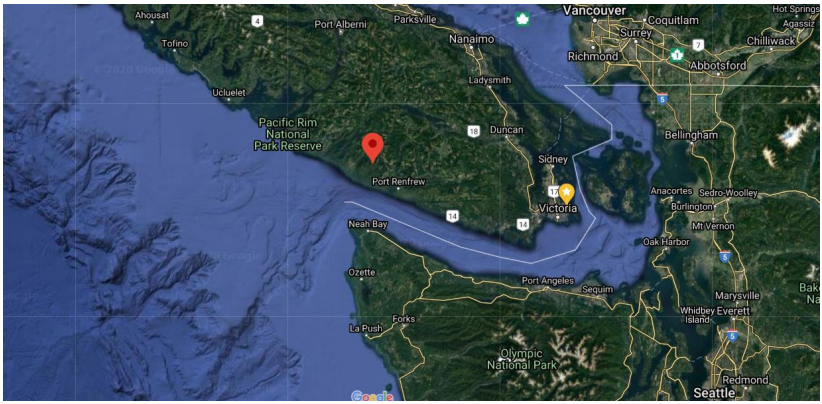

Fig. 1. *Location map of the South Walbran Valley, Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Image: Google Earth.*

Fig. 2. *TJ Watt, The Central Walbran Forest and the Castle Grove (n.d). Digital photo: Courtesy of the artist and Ancient Forest Alliance.*

Fig. 3. *L to R: Chris Kroitor, Leila Sujir, and Jackson Sujir, production shoot for* Forest! *South Walbran Valley, 2016. Photo: Chris Kroitor.*

Fig. 4. *Leila Sujir,* Forest! *(2016–current, work in progress). Video still: Courtesy of the artist.*

Forest! is an expanded collaborative research and artistic project that is currently being developed by Sujir, an artist known for her ambitious and experimental media works using 3D and interactive video technologies. Sujir's artworks often employ dream-like imagery and strategies of magical realism to explore themes of race, immigration, and autobiography, offering a unique and sometimes challenging perspective on Canadian society. *Forest!* is being developed through a series of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grants with the aim of producing a series of large-scale video works and associated research outcomes that seek to "re-story" existing meanings of the South Walbran forest.[4] Sujir initially planned to create a work that considered the forest as a site of personal healing, but as the research-creation process took shape she also sought to account for and acknowledge Indigenous perspectives. Sujir drew on artistic, interdisciplinary, and heuristic methods to develop the project through its initial phases. Her work on this project is process-based, in that it entailed entering into an established social context with a large format camera and a small crew; building community networks and relationships; and working to establish robust, effective, and long-term relational processes with a range of community, academic, and art world stakeholders. Her heuristic methodology navigates these complex community and inter-racial dynamics. Accordingly, the artist develops her process on the ground and in the moment in ways that are responsive to the dynamics of the situation.

As this paper details, what began as an experimental IMAX shoot dealing with questions of technology and aesthetic experience quickly turned into a research project that engaged with important and timely social and ecological questions related to concepts of "decolonization."[5] Sujir's process acknowledged the current moment in Canadian politics and social and cultural life, a moment that is being shaped by the Federal government's response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action towards reconciliation

4 "Re-storying" is a term with broad usage in the field of community development, and particular application in Indigenous contexts. It is concerned with the process of constructing new meanings of traumatic pasts. The key aim of re-storying in Indigenous community contexts is to overcome the social, cultural, and political erasure of Indigenous peoples, drawing on the "multi-faceted use of narratives to heal the past and construct a better future." Christina Woolner, "Re-Storying Canada's Past: A Case Study in the Significance of Narratives in Healing Intractable Conflict," in *Beyond Intractability*, ed. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado. Article published March 2009, accessed February 23, 2021, https://www.beyondintractability.org/casestudy/woolner-re-storying.

5 Indigenous artists and curators in Canada tend to prefer Linda Tuhiwai Smith's definition of the term "decolonization," which outlines a set of methods by which Indigenous researchers can confront colonialism within the academy. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999). In a broader sense, decolonization addresses and attempts to dismantle tendencies towards Eurocentrism.

with Indigenous peoples. This call to action tasks Canadian institutions and citizens with a moral responsibility to make amends for past abuses suffered by Indigenous peoples.[6] Working on "unceded"[7] Indigenous land, Sujir had a responsibility to be accountable to the politics of land and place on Vancouver Island. A working process that respected Indigenous territory and protocol was central to establishing relationships with Indigenous stakeholders. In this regard, Sujir's project contributes to the field of transcultural studies, in its consideration of how a heuristic methodology of "conciliation" or "friendship" can inform a decolonial imagining of the Canadian landscape. As a racialized subject herself, Sujir's project reveals the unevenness and inequities of experiences of colonialist racism, something the legal historian Renisa Mawani refers to as an "asymmetrical field of colonial racisms."[8]

In the Canadian context, where Indigenous peoples are subject to the terms of the Indian Act, Indigenous people are treated as distinct from Canadian citizens and essentially as wards of the state.[9] Indigenous experiences of racism and colonialism cannot be compared with immigrant experiences, although racialized experiences are often collapsed together under the category of BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. However, as Sujir's project demonstrates, immigrant experiences of living between and across colonial and settler cultures with lived understandings and experiences of racism equip some immigrant settlers with the interpersonal skills and insights to build inter-racial understanding and provisional forms of solidarity. In this regard, Sujir's methodology of person-to-person conciliation was central to mitigating Indigenous-settler tensions with relation to her project, and enabled new transcultural understandings and a new picturing of the forest.

Artistic intentions

Sujir's two matriarchs—her mother, who had lived in Canada, and her aunt in India—introduced her to the ways of the forest. Upon entering the West Coast

6 Further details of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada mandate can be found here: "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," Government of Canada, last modified December 15, 2020, https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525.

7 Ninety-five percent of the province of British Columbia is on unceded traditional First Nations territory, i.e., territory that First Nations people never legally relinquished to the Crown or to Canada. See also Joshua Hergesheimer, "Unceded Territory," *Megaphone Magazine*, March 18, 2016, accessed March 30, 2020, http://www.megaphonemagazine.com/unceded_territory.

8 Renisa Mawani, *Colonial Proximities: Crossracial Encounters and Juridical Truths in British Columbia, 1871–1921* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 32.

9 The Indian Act is the federal government statute that determines and administers the status of First Nations people. A simple definition and more context can be found at "The Indian Act," *Indigenous Foundations,* accessed January 16, 2021, https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_indian_act.

forests in 2016, Sujir's initial intention was to create an artwork in memory of her mother, not only as a tribute but as part of a process of healing from the grief of her passing. The artist reflects as follows:

> When I started the *Forest Breath* project in June 2016, a year had almost passed since my mother had passed away on my birthday, June 19. As a way of anticipating that strange collision, the anniversary of her death and my birthday, I started this project in the forest.[10]

She further recounts how, after she underwent a serious operation for cancer at the young age of 24, she was taken by her mother to the West Coast forests to recuperate. Sujir states, "I didn't die, to my surprise. The forest was where I found wonder and learned how to be alive again."[11] The forest was thus a space from which to contemplate life and death.

Sujir's work in the forest is also a tribute to the legacy of her aunt, Manorama Savur, a renowned Indian sociologist who passed away in 2014. Sujir recounts,

> My aunt's last major research project, which she talked extensively to me about, was on the destruction of the bamboo forests of India and the resulting desertification as a result of deforestation, two words which were and still are mysterious to me.[12]

Savur's book was the result of a considerable body of interdisciplinary work that drew attention to the environmental and socio-economic impact of the pulp and paper industry on forest dwellers.[13] Savur's concerns regarding the bamboo forests of Northeastern India were in line with those of numerous scientists, academics, and activists alarmed by how neo-liberalism and Western-style (neo-colonial) industrialization and modernization began "to undo policies of fair land acquisition, undermine environmental protection and reverse the fight for tribal rights."[14] These debates and contentions,

10 Leila Sujir, email to author, August 25, 2018.

11 Sujir, email to author, August 25, 2018.

12 Sujir, email to author, August 25, 2018.

13 Manorama Savur, *And the Bamboo Flowers in the Indian Forests: What Did the Pulp and Paper Industry Do?* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2003).

14 Rohini Mohan, "Narendra Modi's War on the Environment," *Al Jazeera America*, April 10, 2015, accessed February 17, 2021, http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/4/narendra-modis-war-on-the-indian-environment.html, quoted in T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 170, fn. 4. Savur wrote several articles for the *Economic and Political Weekly* expressing her concerns about the

which have escalated into situations of radical politics and armed violence in many states of India,[15] have also provided context for the work of numerous prominent Indian artists such as Ravi Agarwal, Raqs Media Collective, Amar Kanwar, Ravi Sundaram, and Desire Machine Collective. While the risks and asymmetries of power relations between and across Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in India and Canada are not comparable, Sujir's work is nevertheless aligned with the projects of her Indian peers. This is particularly apparent in terms of her concern for the politics of land and the politics of the forest, which encompasses a concern for Indigenous rights, self-determination, and sovereignty: a politics that is beginning to resonate widely within the global art world.[16]

Sujir's understanding of the forests of Vancouver Island was also shaped by the highly publicized environmental protests and campaigns that emerged in the 1990s and are known as the "War in the Woods."[17] Sujir states,

> When I returned from the 2016 *Forest!* shoot, I went to the Yasodhara Ashram for a retreat, on Kootenay Lake. There [I] met friend and colleague, Juniper Glass, she had been part of the protests as a teenager, to save the Walbran. … Juniper introduced me to her friend Sarah [Turner], and they showed me, over tea, their time at the bridge, in protests for the Walbran.[18]

The geographer Bruce Braun has commented that the well-organized and highly mediatized protests were "high drama, and in a matter of days, [the forests of Vancouver Island were] placed firmly on the political landscape,

impact of neo-colonial policies towards the forest on Indigenous (tribal) communities. See, for example, Manorama Savur, "Rule of Foreign Agencies in the Environment," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 43 (2004): 4689–4690.

15 See, for example, Vandana Shiva, *Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflicts Over Natural Resources in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991).

16 Take, for example, the increasing interest in global Indigeneities as manifested in large-scale biennale format exhibitions, including *Àbadakone | Continuous Fire | Feu continuel,* November 8, 2019–October 4, 2020, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; *Nirin,* March 14–September 6, 2020, 22nd Biennale of Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

17 As Daniel Pierce writes, the "War in the Woods" was "one of the largest acts of mass civil disobedience in Canadian history, with almost 1,000 people arrested. … The arrests of youths and elders were shown on television screens and in newspapers around the world." Daniel Pierce, "25 Years after the War in the Woods: Why B.C.'s Forests are Still in Crisis," *The Narwhal*, May 14, 2018, accessed March 16, 2020, https://thenarwhal.ca/25-years-after-clayoquot-sound-blockades-the-war-in-the-woods-never-ended-and-its-heating-back-up. The protest had a significant impact on concepts of the wilderness and environmentalism in Canada and further afield.

18 Leila Sujir, email to author, March 17, 2020. Sarah Turner tells me that the protests in the Walbran forest began in 1991. Sarah Turner, email to author, March 21, 2020.

not only within Canada, but internationally."[19] These protests centered on issues of industrial scale logging and the lack of Indigenous and community consultation related to land use planning and management. The highly emotive media images that emerged through these protests became part of the national imaginary, shaping mainstream attitudes towards the forest. However, as Braun also points out, these protests propelled a dualistic politics of the forest, authorizing certain actors to speak and participate in the debates while marginalizing others, including local communities, forestry workers, and First Nations peoples.[20] Braun critiques the essentializing assumptions underlying this dualistic politics of the forest as standing in the way of a progressive and inclusive ecopolitics.[21]

The forest as a settler colonial imaginary

In 2018, I invited Sujir to contribute a work developed from her initial shoot in the Walbran forest to a group exhibition that I was curating titled *Supernatural: Art, Technology and the Forest*.[22] The exhibition explored how photography and contemporary lens-based art practices arising out of a Western art canon conceived of the forest as a social and cultural artefact, and how the photographic image, as a readily accessible contemporary art form shaping popular visual culture, contributed to producing the forest as an aesthetic construct, inevitably reinforcing settler colonial and nationalist world views. The exhibition explored how the ongoing contemporary picturing of the forest continued to play a significant role in unifying how we, as settlers, construct the concept of British Columbia (BC) as an imaginary, such that it contributes to the construction of a provincial and national identity. The exhibition was an exercise in understanding an ongoing and admittedly "unconscious" practice of "worlding" according to Gayatri Spivak's definition of the concept, as a process whereby image-making can be considered as an "act of material and ideological conquest,

19 Bruce Braun, *The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture, and Power on Canada's West Coast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 1.

20 Braun, *The Intemperate Rainforest*, 2.

21 Braun, *The Intemperate Rainforest*, 2.

22 *Supernatural: Art, Technology and the Forest*, May 19–September 3, 2018, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Canada. The title of the exhibition riffs on a long-running provincial government tourism campaign called "Super Natural British Columbia." This exhibition took up a critical reflection on landscape in Canadian art history, as argued by John O'Brian and Peter White, though it focused specifically on the settler imaginary. John O'Brian and Peter White, *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2017).

a form of narrating and inscribing colonial power"[23] onto the representation of a landscape.

The process that Sujir embarked upon for this exhibition in working with her raw footage from the South Walbran forest, however, was in the spirit of (re)conciliation with Indigenous peoples.[24] Accordingly, Sujir sought the formal consent of the Pacheedaht First Nation (PFN), whose traditional territories encompass the South Walbran forest. Whether or not she knew it at the time, this gesture of seeking consent, a gesture which acknowledges Indigenous peoples' deep connections to the land, set in motion a process of "unsettling" a deeply entrenched Canadian settler imaginary, troubling prevailing meanings of the forest. The picturing of the forest landscape could no longer be romanticized or idealized according to the terms of settler colonialism with its foundations in a concept of *terra nullius*;[25] it needed to account for Indigenous conceptions, perspectives, and relationships to the land, suggesting the need for Canadians to reconceive this imaginary. In other words, what the concept of (re)conciliation would ideally demand of settlers is the problematizing of a nationalist identity, calling settlers to be accountable for their construction and projection of a nationalist imaginary upon Indigenous peoples, rather than a process of reconciliation that seeks

23 John Muthyala, *Reworlding America: Myth, History, and Narrative* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 1. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Rana of Simur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–272.

24 I use brackets inside the word "reconciliation" to politicize the usage of a word that is now becoming ubiquitous in Canada, and thus is at risk of becoming devoid of meaning. The complexity and fraught context of the work of reconciliation is outlined in an essay by Metis artist and critic David Garneau, who writes that "'conciliation' is 'the action of bringing into harmony.' It is an extrajudicial process that is a 'conversion of a state of hostility or distrust,' a 'peaceable or friendly union.' The word calls to mind the meeting of two previously separate parties. Applied to the Canadian situation, it allows the picturing of First Nations and Inuit people as having an independent existence prior to contact. 'Reconciliation,' on the other hand, is synonymous with difference. Re-conciliation refers to repairing a harmonious relationship gone sour. This word choice imposes the fiction that equanimity is the status quo between Aboriginal people and Canada." David Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation," *West Coast Line* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 28–38; 35.

25 Bruce Granville Miller argues that the concept of *terra nullius* in BC was based on the impressions of the colonist Joseph Trutch, who stated, "The Indians have really no rights to the lands they claim, nor are they of any actual value or utility to them; and I cannot see why they should retain these lands to the prejudice of the general interests of the Colony, or be allowed to make a market of them either to Government or to individuals." Bruce Granville Miller, "A Short Commentary on Land Claims in BC" (Speaking notes, 11th Annual National Land Claims Workshop, October 2003), *Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs*, accessed March 10, 2020, https://www.ubcic.bc.ca/a_short_commentary_on_land_claims_in_bc. Recommendation 47 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action requests the repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery and of the concept of *terra nullius*. See this useful interactive: "Beyond 94," *CBC News*, March 19, 2018, accessed March 15, 2020, https://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/longform-single/beyond-94.

to symbolically assimilate or appropriate an Indigenous imaginary into a Canadian identity.[26]

The site of Sujir's primary work is an area of old-growth forest on so-called Crown land, adjacent to 16,450 hectares of forest managed as the Carmanah-Walbran Provincial Park. Since the early 1990s, environmentalists have mounted a protracted campaign to prevent logging in this forest area, in part by creating walking trails to encourage recreational use and connect hikers and campers with the beauty of the forest while simultaneously producing a form of occupation, thus enabling long-term surveillance of the area in case logging were to begin unannounced.[27]

Fig. 5. *The ongoing campaign to save the Walbran Valley, 2016. Courtesy of the Wilderness Committee, Victoria. Photo: Chris Istace.*

Given the widespread calls from Indigenous artists, activists, and rights groups in North America for Indigenous peoples to "decolonize," that is, to return to (traditional ways of) the land,[28] Sujir was surprised when, during

26 Consider Garneau's contention that "Re-conciliation … seems a deliberate tactic in the ongoing assimilationist strategy of the Canadian empire." Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces," 35.

27 Haema Sivanesan (moderator) with Bill Jones, Leila Sujir, Carol Sawyer, Kelly Richardson, Mike McLean, Peter Cressey, Torrance Coste, Erika Heyrman, Jessie Demers, and Emily Hoffpauir, conversation in the South Walbran Forest, audio recording by the AGGV at an outreach event run by Victoria and Montreal: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (AGGV) and Concordia University, August 11, 2018.

28 Shared and circulated widely via online communities and sources, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's essay has been deeply influential in popularizing a radical concept of "decolonization" as bringing "about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life." They state that "our/their relationships

an early meeting with the Pacheedaht First Nation (PFN), she was roundly informed by the Chief and members of the Band Council that they were loggers and that the PFN relied on logging as a significant source of income.[29]

As a curator working with Sujir to support the development of her project, I attended this initial meeting, which included the Pacheedaht Band Manager, Chief Jeff Jones, elder Bill Jones, and other members of the Band Council. This meeting was neither a formal research interview nor an information-gathering discussion. Instead, the artist's intention was to follow Indigenous protocol to request permission to work on unceded territories in the spirit of (re)conciliation. The ensuing conversation established the tone for ongoing exchanges, setting the foundation for the beginnings of an extended process towards a relationship of *conciliation*. This meeting brought together a number of positionalities around the development of Sujir's artistic work, and served to tacitly establish relational terms, including relational boundaries, terms of trust, and terms of intercultural understanding.

With regards to Sujir's request to work on Pacheedaht territory in the forest, my observation was that the PFN Band Council felt antagonized by what they described as the stealthy and persistent efforts of environmentalists who, although acknowledging the PFN's traditional territory, were singularly concerned with protecting the forest from logging without adequately recognizing the financial realities of First Nations communities. The Chief explained to us the need for logging as a way to ensure jobs in the PFN community. He indicated that their community operated a lumber mill and tree farms that were significant for the community's economic development. It seemed to me that the impasse between environmentalists motivated by a liberal Canadian point of view and the Chief and Council of the PFN spoke volumes about the current social, economic, and political circumstances of many West Coast First Nations.[30]

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to land comprise our/their epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies. For the settlers, Indigenous peoples are in the way and, in the destruction of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous communities, and over time and through law and policy, Indigenous peoples' claims to land under settler regimes, land is recast as property and as a resource." Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40; 1, 6.

29 Meeting between the author, Leila Sujir, Jorge Zavagno, and Regan Shrumm, as well as Pacheedaht Chief Jeff Jones, Band Manager April Roper, members of the Band Council, and elder Bill Jones, May 22, 2018. Neighboring First Nations communities, including the Dididaht and Cowichan, have similar agreements with major logging companies.

30 Indigenous artist and educator Carey Newman describes the modern treaty-making process as pursuing a tactic of "divide and deceive" to create the appearance that Indigenous groups consent to provide access to land and resources while undermining hereditary rights and claims to sovereignty. Carey Newman, "There are Two Kinds of Indigenous Governance Structures, but Canada has been Listening to Just One," *CBC News*, January 11, 2019, accessed September 30, 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/gaslink-pipeline-1.4973825.

As Bruce Braun has argued, the wholesale harvesting of the forest by the logging industry is at one end of a spectrum of settler relations, while environmental activism and campaigns to protect the forest are at the other.[31] The paradox, as it appeared to me, was that both ends of this spectrum of settler colonialism ultimately conspired to keep Indigenous peoples off their traditional lands. Further, what I gleaned from this meeting was that many First Nations bands were facing exceedingly difficult and paradoxical situations, unable to oppose the capitalist logic of Canada's extractive resource economy on the one hand, while sacrificing hereditary rights on the other in order to gain a share of profits. In other words, First Nations communities have neither the political sovereignty nor the economic self-sufficiency for self-determination. The difficult choices that many First Nations bands are compelled to make describe the ongoing face of colonialism in Canada.

A 2018 report by the Canadian Forest Service published on the Government of Canada's Natural Resources website states:

> Along the southwest edge of Vancouver Island, British Columbia (BC), lies the traditional territory of the Pacheedaht First Nation with a population of 287, of which about a third live within the territory. Due to the historic low prospects of employment, the majority of people have been forced to seek livelihoods outside of their traditional territory. The forests on the 163,000 terrestrial hectares of this territory contain fir, hemlock, red cedar, yellow cedar and other tree species that the Pacheedaht people have valued and used for thousands of years.

Just ten years ago the forested area was entirely allocated through forest tenures and licence areas to third parties. None of these were held by the Pacheedaht.[32]

In January 2020, Chief Jeff Jones explained to the artist that in order to ensure ongoing access to a supply of cedar for cultural purposes, the Band Council had developed a cedar conservation strategy that encompassed a 400-year plan.[33] A report on a Federal government website confirms, "In 2005, concerned with the long-term supply of cedar and their access to it for cultural purposes, the Pacheedaht developed the Pacheedaht Cedar Conservation Strategy, a project through which they identified the volume and size of cedar that was needed to revitalize and support cultural practices."[34] The report

31 Bruce Braun, *The Intemperate Rainforest*, passim.

32 Natural Resources Canada, *The State of Canada's Forests, Annual Report 2018* (Ottawa: National Capital Region, 2018), 13, https://d1ied5g1xfgpx8.cloudfront.net/pdfs/39336.pdf.

33 Leila Sujir, conversation with author, January 9, 2020.

34 Natural Resources Canada, *The State of Canada's Forests,* 13.

further states, "The PFN took a long-term view of their needs by envisioning a 400-year strategy; 400 years being the length of time it takes a red cedar to grow to a useable size for certain cultural items (such as large ocean-going canoes and totem poles)."[35] However, in order to do so they were required to forge a partnership with both the Federal government and the local forestry industry. Within the span of the last decade, logging has become central to the economy of the PFN.[36] The 2018 report directly quotes the Chief of the PFN, who explains that "Pacheedaht for a long time has been shut out from the financial benefits that the resources extracted from our Traditional Territory have bestowed upon corporations and the government of BC."[37]

By contrast, racialized immigrants, such as the South Asian immigrants who began arriving in BC in the nineteenth century, themselves displaced by the processes of political decolonization in the Punjab, were able to set up successful sawmills and lumber companies and, in doing so, participated in the transformation of BC's economy.[38] By a mix of ingenuity, hard work, and community cohesion, South Asian and other immigrant communities were able to gradually acquire capital and social capital, despite the racism that they faced. However, Indigenous communities, subject to the terms of the Indian

35 Natural Resources Canada, *The State of Canada's Forests,* 13.

36 Negotiating at a common treaty table with the Dididaht First Nation, the Pacheedaht reached an Agreement in Principle with the Government of Canada and the Government of British Columbia in June 2019. Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, "Dididaht and Pacheedaht First Nations, Canada and British Columbia Sign Agreement in Principle and Move to Final Stage of Treaty Negotiations," *Newswire,* June 28, 2019, accessed October 1, 2020, https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/dididaht-and-pacheedaht-first-nations-canada-and-british-columbia-sign-agreement-in-principle-and-move-to-final-stage-of-treaty-negotiations-867382479.html. The Government of Canada's website states that "BC and First Nations are negotiating modern treaties to resolve questions of uncertainty with respect to ownership or use of land and resources and the application of laws." See "Why is Canada Negotiating Treaties in BC?" *Government of Canada*, modified September 15, 2010, accessed October 1, 2020, https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100022836/110010002283. The modern treaty-making process has been widely criticized as an expensive process that continues to subject First Nations to assimilationist terms, extinguishing Aboriginal titles, and requiring First Nations communities to operate as municipal-style governments rather than as Indigenous Nations. A major underlying driver of the modern treaty-making process in BC is the question of the Aboriginal title, which restricts land and resource development. Aboriginal title is a "common law doctrine" that acknowledges the land rights of Indigenous people. It prevents the development of land without Indigenous consent, thus impacting the economy of BC, which is essentially a resource economy. The signing of a treaty between a First Nation and the Provincial government, however, legally distinguishes First Nations land from Crown land and establishes terms of First Nations self-governance, giving First Nations responsibility for economic and social development in their communities. Over time, First Nations people are required to repay loans from Provincial and Federal governments towards the substantial costs of the treaty-making process and to pay land tax on their territories.

37 Natural Resources Canada, *The State of Canada's Forests,* 14.

38 See "Punjabi Canadian Legacy Project: South Asian Historic Places Project," *Heritage BC*, accessed November 27, 2019, https://heritagebc.ca/cultural-maps/south-asian-canadian-map/?lang=en.

Act, were doubly displaced on their unceded lands, unable to substantially benefit from modernity and the growth of capital.[39]

A system of reserves imposed various restrictions on Indigenous peoples, including a system of passes that required Indigenous people to request permission from the Indian Agent in order to leave the reserve, whether for work or social visits. This detention and regulation of Indigenous people meant that they became increasingly estranged from traditional practices and ways of life that connected them to their land, radically transforming their links to the land.[40] Moreover, this system of reserves functioned as a tool for opening up land for settlement and development.[41] This legacy of land regulation and restriction continues to this day in BC by way of the treaty-making process. This was certainly true for the Pacheedaht people; a recent report to the government of Canada states, "Since Contact, many developments and historic events have occurred to the Pacheedaht and within their territory that have had significant impacts on their traditional rights."[42] The report goes on to list these events, which include, among other numerous factors, "disease and depopulation after Contact; establishment of Indian Reserves and the corollary alienation of Pacheedaht lands and resources; loss of language, culture, and traditions through Indian Residential Schools, anti-potlatch laws, and the efforts of missionaries and Indian Agents; industrial logging and associated environmental impacts."[43]

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39 In a panel discussion entitled "Material Histories" (*aabaakwad 2020 NIRIN*, 22nd Biennale of Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, March 16, 2020), Anishnaabe artist Michael Belmore referred to the pithy artist statement that accompanied his work at an exhibition at the Banff Centre in 1997, which stated, "Indians are as good at clear cutting forests as white people." With this, he raised both the problem of racism and the quandary that Canada's resource economy imposes on its Indigenous peoples.

40 For a brief overview of the Canadian system of Indigenous reserves, see Erin Hanson, "Reserves," *Indigenous Foundations,* accessed March 19, 2020, https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/reserves/.

41 Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 65, quoted in Charles R. Menzies and Caroline F. Butler, "The Indigenous Foundation of the Resource Economy of BC's North Coast," *Labour/Le Travail* 61 (2008): 131–149; 141.

42 Pacheedaht Heritage Project, Pacheedaht First Nation Treaty Department, and Traditions Consulting Services, Inc., *Pacheedaht First Nation Traditional Use and Occupancy Study: Report for Port Metro Vancouver Roberts Bank Terminal 2 Project*, July 2019, accessed March 19, 2020, https://iaac-aeic.gc.ca/050/documents/p80054/132555E.pdf, iii.

43 Pacheedaht Heritage Project, *Pacheedaht First Nation Traditional Use and Occupancy Study*, iii–iv. For a more detailed discussion on the establishment of the Pacheedaht Reserves, see Pacheedaht Heritage Project, Pacheedaht First Nation Treaty Department, and Traditions Consulting Services, Inc., *Pacheedaht First Nation Traditional Marine Use and Occupancy Study*, 2014, 35–40.

In seeking the consent of the PFN, Sujir had to contend with the dilemma that while the forest continued to have a powerful and deeply resonant spiritual and cultural value to the PFN, the economic reality meant that they had to adjust their cultural views and ideas of the forest. There was a tension between the artist's association with environmentalists and the PFN's need to support logging as a means of income for their community. The PFN Band Council's willingness to concede to Sujir's project, however, pivoted on the artist's explanation of her first encounter with the forest as an experience of "healing." She described to the Pacheedaht Chief and Band Manager how her mother had brought her to the old-growth forest after the artist's cancer diagnosis and operation and explained how she had decided to return to the forest following her mother's passing. Her loss was immediately met with empathy, and her reason for wanting to work in the forest was considered in the context of her valuing its deeper spiritual significance. In other words, the artist's conceptualization of the forest as a site of "healing" associated with the figure of the mother resonated with the Pacheedaht Band Council's worldviews, establishing a common ground between the artist and the community.

For Sujir, what had begun as a personal project using stereoscopic video as a means to convey the healing power of the forest quickly became a project invested in grappling with the various social, political, and culturally constructed meanings of the land, as well as settler relationships to it and to the Indigenous peoples who were its traditional stewards. Her project wrestled with how to make a work of art dealing with issues of trauma and healing on unceded land: that is, how to make a personal (autobiographical) work of art that also respected the traumas of others. The project needed to reflect on immigrant/settler colonial relationships to the land, understanding that South Asians in Canada, though displaced by their own experiences of colonialism, were participating in Canadian nationalist practices of colonization by the very processes of immigration and access to resources and capital through which they gained an advantage over Indigenous peoples.

Sujir's project thus asks the following questions: How do we see ourselves on this land, given our own experiences of racism and colonialism, and given the mandate of (re)conciliation? Can Indigenous views of the land and forest coexist with the meanings settlers find in it? Can there be a productive role for the figure of the immigrant and the immigrant imagination within reconceptualizations of the forest landscape? How can we understand the forest as a site of healing when the concept of healing refers to the artist's personal experiences of illness and grief, yet for Indigenous peoples is a term associated with intergenerational trauma and a legacy of colonial abuse? In other words, can a more consultative, collaborative process with Indigenous peoples produce an image of the Canadian landscape in

accordance with an alternate imaginary—one that is polyvocal, sustainable, mutually supportive, and respectful? The process of seeking these answers is ongoing and elaborated upon below with regards to two of Sujir's artworks: *Forest Breath* and *Aerial*.

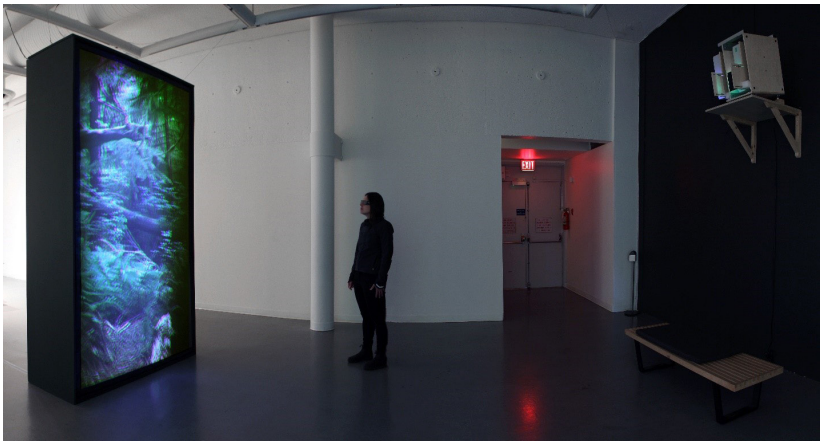

Fig. 6. *Leila Sujir,* Forest Breath *(2018), Stereoscopic 3D (S3D) video installation, 10 mins, looped. Installation view, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Courtesy of the artist and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Photo: Mike Andrew McLean, 2018.*

Forest Breath

Forest Breath was the first stereoscopic video work produced as part of the overarching *Forest!* project.[44] It was the starting point for a renewed conversation about the idea of the forest. The work consists of four floor-to-ceiling scaled stereoscopic video images of the old-growth forest projected onto a large lightbox resembling a window or portal. Each video image appears as an almost silent, still-yet-moving scene of the forest in real time, with flitting insects and swaying branches in the foreground and deep vanishing points that draw the viewer into the forest landscape. Each scene holds for a few minutes before it fades into an abstract blur. The videos run as a looped cycle. The sound of the videos reproduces the near silence of the forest, but the transition between scenes is marked by an abstract, reverberating sound created by the convergence of two sine waves in a way that produces a felt sound, marking a visceral transition or movement

44 *Forest Breath* (2018) was first screened at the exhibition *Supernatural: Art, Technology and the Forest.* It was subsequently included in the exhibition *Garden in the Machine,* September 21–December 15, 2019, Surrey Art Gallery, Canada.

through space.[45] The luminous volume of the video moves with the viewer as they walk into and around the video environment. The immersive quality of this experience evokes the possibility of shared breath, transpiration, and a mutually constitutive and integral way of being between and among species.

The writer and critic Nancy Tousley explains that the voluminous quality of the video-space and the sense of an extended foreground and background are produced by an in-camera technique known as pull parallax,

> Pulling the parallax deepens or expands the space of a film or video image by making the foreground seem to move at a greater speed than the background. Working with cinematographer Chris Kroitor, grandson of IMAX co-founder Roman Kroitor, Sujir used pull parallax to video the forest and "pull" the moving image from relative flatness to extended 3D. … As a result, a viewer who walks toward *Forest Breath* feels the space of the video expand as it seems to move out toward her, producing a deeper and more immersive virtual experience.[46]

The work seeks to approximate the experience of the old-growth forest, recognizing that a key interest of stakeholders concerned with preserving or better managing the old-growth forests is to reconnect urbanized communities that have been desensitized to nature.[47] For Sujir, the forest (as associated with the concept of healing) is conceived of as a protective and nurturing site, a restorative environment. Thus, *Forest Breath* is an attempt to translate an ontological experience of the forest into a sensory one.

To this end, *Forest Breath* draws on a technological phenomenon of stereoscopic video that Sujir describes as "elastic space," referring to the kind of "elastic" quality of the projected three dimensional video image as the viewer moves around the gallery space in relation to it. The artist explains that "stereoscopy appears to displace space and can have a kind of dizzying or disorienting effect on physiological being." This phenomenon intrigued her as an artist, as it provided a medium through which she could explore physical descriptions of the experience of cultural displacement rather than relying on intellectual or theoretical ones.[48] For

45 Sujir explains that editing 3D video requires cutting an image in (virtual) space rather than cutting an image in a plane. Thus, the abstract "blur" that marks the transition between scenes is a 3D cut rendered as color. The abstract sound follows this logic of marking a transition in space-time. Sujir, conversation with author, March 30, 2020.

46 Tousley, "Leila Sujir's Forest of Pixels," 117.

47 Leila Sujir, conversation in the forest, audio recording, August 11, 2018.

48 Leila Sujir, conversation with author, January 22, 2021.

Sujir, this elasticity and the doubling of images as produced by stereoscopy symbolizes a doubling and convergence of "worlds" or inhabited spaces.[49] In this instance, the convergence of the quiet, protective, healing world of the forest with the demanding, impersonal world of everyday urban life was represented by the space of the art gallery. Sujir deploys this phenomenon as a means to "enchant" the experience of urban life.[50] Drawing on this logic of elastic space, Sujir conceives of video as both image and sensation, as an embodied encounter, and as an experience to be *felt* in the body, evoking memory and imagination. As such, *Forest Breath* is "dream-like"[51] and operates in a realm between reality and fantasy, producing an ambiguous, hyper-real, hyper-sensory chimeric experience, enticing the viewer to be *present* in the forest, to *be with* the forest, and to perceive its sentience.[52]

Sujir explains that such an awareness of the forest was taught to her by her mother, who drew on Eastern teachings such as those of the Bengali poet and writer, Rabindranath Tagore.[53] Tagore wrote in his essay "The Religion of the Forest" that "nature stands on her own right, proving that she has her great function, to impart the peace of the eternal to human emotions."[54] Tagore genders the forest as feminine, describing her as a meditative space, dignified, and possessing agency. Drawing on a range of classical Indian cultural sources and references, he conceives of the forest as mother, as a protective and nurturing entity. It is a space where each species lives in mutual cooperation with others. As a model and metaphor for society, the forest teaches us how to live together, representing, for Tagore, the ideal of unity in diversity: a model of democracy.[55]

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49 Sujir, conversation with author, August 11, 2018.

50 Leila Sujir and Jorge Zavagno, conversation with author, January 20, 2021.

51 As described by the artist in Tousley, "Leila Sujir's Forest of Pixels," 114.

52 Tousley, "Leila Sujir's Forest of Pixels," 114. Sujir explains that her use of stereoscopy inverts the experience of virtual reality, which aims to do away with the body. By contrast, Sujir's intention is to use "elastic space" as a way to make us highly aware of our bodies, producing a hyper-sensory experience.

53 Sujir, conversation with the author, August 11, 2018.

54 Rabindranath Tagore, "The Religion of the Forest," *The Complete Works of Rabindranath Tagore*, accessed February 22, 2020, https://tagoreweb.in/Essays/creative-unity-218/the-religion-of-the-forest-2630/2.

55 Some of the philosophical concepts of the forest that inform Sujir's work invite comparison with a recent video work by research-based audio and image collaborators. The Otolith Group's *O Horizon* (2018), a film commissioned for Bauhaus Imaginista, has had wide exposure in exhibitions and film festivals globally.

Correspondingly, during a day-long field trip to the South Walbran forest with artists, activists, and community members,[56] Pacheedaht elder Bill Jones shared the significance that the forest holds for him. He said,

> Grandpa used to say that you only go up [to the forest] to pray and meditate and be quiet up there. We asked for what the forest would provide us, and only harvested what our villages could use immediately.[57]

Fig. 7. *Conversation in the forest, 2018. Organized by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Photo: Jorge Zavagno.*

At the conclusion of this discussion, Jones offered a prayer:

> Our great Mother, our great Spirit, we are most grateful to you as our advisor and provider … it's crucial that the forests flourish and survive [as] we are indeed a part of your forest. We are most grateful that we are here.[58]

56 Sujir considered this event to be an important part of her post-production process, in keeping with her heuristic methodology and desire to maintain transparency with the Pacheedaht and Port Renfrew communities. Leila Sujir and Jorge Zavagno, telephone conversation with author, January 20, 2021.

57 Sujir, conversation in the forest, audio recording, August 11, 2018.

58 Sujir, conversation in the forest, audio recording, August 11, 2018.

In a manner not entirely unlike the South Asian conception as popularized by Tagore, Jones expressed his regard for the forest as Mother, underscoring the spiritual significance of the forest in a First Nations context. His prayer raises a tension, or the central paradox of the PFN's contemporary relationship to the forest, on the one hand invoking its spiritual power while on the other acknowledging a changing relationship whereby the forest is now being logged by the PFN as a source of income. Both Sujir and Jones recognized the significance of the forest as being of cultural value, while navigating the complexities and paradoxes of various community stakeholders' relationships to it.

It is in this context that Sujir claims that "the forest is the place for talking about the forest,"[59] that is to say, it is the *experience* of being immersed in the environment of the forest that teaches one how to understand it, to be receptive to it. The experience of being in the forest, Sujir states, "ruptures our preconceptions of it."[60] This understanding informed her representation of the forest as image and sensation. Beyond fiction and theory, the immersive experience of the forest enables us to comprehend it in deeper ways, recognizing it as having a capacity to act on the experiencing subject. Jones and Sujir's shared valuing of the forest, which centers on culturally different but mutually conforming concepts, enabled Sujir to further develop her project by way of the creation of a second artwork, titled *Aerial,* in 2019.[61]

Aerial

In the summer of 2018, after consulting with elder Bill Jones, Sujir undertook a second work in the South Walbran forest titled *Aerial,* now part of the larger body of work comprising the *Forest!* project.[62] *Aerial* surveyed the forest from the viewpoint of a hummingbird, mimicking its flightpath and capturing an image of the forest through movement. Shot with a high-resolution camera mounted on a heavy lift drone, the forest is seen from above its tallest trees. The drone then swoops down into the valleys, across rivers and through ravines.

59 Sujir, conversation in the forest, audio recording, August 11, 2018.

60 Sujir, conversation with author, January 22, 2021.

61 Sujir and Zavagno, telephone conversation with author, January 20, 2021.

62 *Aerial* (2019) was commissioned by curator Janine Marchessault as part of a screening program of large format digital film shorts. The program was titled *XL Outer Worlds* and celebrated the 50th anniversary of the IMAX, a Canadian invention. See "Home," *XL Outer Worlds*, accessed March 19, 2020, https://www.outerworlds.org.

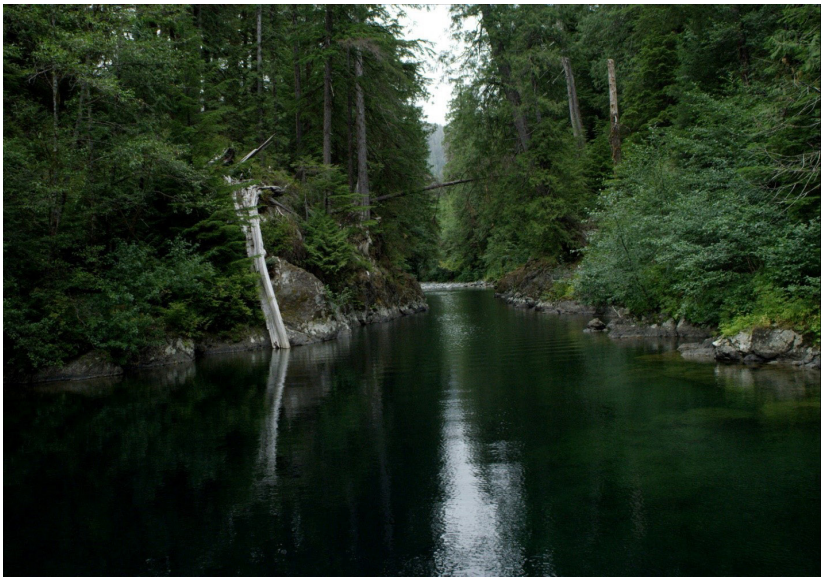

Fig. 8. *Leila Sujir,* Aerial (2019)*. Large format video, 10.15 mins. Video still courtesy of the artist. See excerpt: https://youtu.be/p7muCuE4GQ0.*

Sujir explains that the concept of the drone-camera as hummingbird was born as she watched hummingbirds in the cedar forests in the Kootenays (interior British Columbia) and noticed their machine-like sound. Here, nature provided a reference or a way in to making the artwork, offering an analogy between the bird and the drone-camera.[63] The hummingbird inspired a way of working that followed the logic of the forest, in which the drone-camera, taking on a bird-like trajectory, offered an entirely different perspective of the forest and a radically different picturing; rather than a static, composed, picturesque image, the drone recorded vertigo, speed, a fractured image of the landscape, which denied the very possibility of a totalizing image.[64]

Sujir explains that Jones had mentioned the hummingbirds in the forest to her, though she herself had never seen them there before. "But on the first day of the shoot," Sujir recalls, "Bill was invited to do a territory acknowledgment and blessing, when suddenly a hummingbird appeared—a delightful

63 Sujir, conversation with author, August 11, 2018.

64 The capacity of emerging digital technologies to "de-colonize" settler worldviews is an emerging discussion among Indigenous artists, as evidenced in a panel discussion between Indigenous speakers at the 22nd Biennale of Sydney. asinnajaq, Alan Michelson, Lisa Reihana, and Jaimie Isaac, "Digital Imaginaries" (Conversation, *aabaakwad 2020 NIRIN*, 22nd Biennale of Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, March 17, 2020).

and unexpected auspicious omen."[65] In West Coast Indigenous cultures, hummingbirds are considered as messengers of goodwill and friendship.[66] *Aerial* developed in the spirit of pursuing a genuine exchange and friendship with the PFN.

Sujir explains that the moral responsibility to work with the PFN according to a spirit of friendship came about through her conversations with the Band Council. During these conversations, she became acutely aware of being in another culture. She found herself not entirely sure of the existing cultural protocols, nor of how to navigate the social context in order to move her project forward in a way that maintained a respectful dialogue.[67] Rather than taking a defensive position, she took a congenial approach in an effort to mitigate misunderstanding or any potential offense she might cause, recognizing also that the process of seeking Indigenous consent to work in the forest would require humility and respect for the PFN's position. This awareness and sensitivity towards another culture—of being deferential and respecting the PFN's concerns about her approach to the forest—came instinctively to Sujir, who has lived her life across and between countries and cultures.[68] It reflected an openness and desire to learn from the PFN and thereby to broaden and enrich her own cultural understanding. Thus, despite the PFN's initial reservations about Sujir's request, the artist consistently approached the project with an open mind and an openness of vision. In other words, Sujir did not begin creating *Aerial* with a preconceived artistic goal or vision, but rather allowed the work to take shape in accordance with her conversations with the PFN.

Sujir explains that, given her time in the forest and with Jones, she became increasingly aware of the impacts of industrialized logging on First Nations communities as a form of resource extraction. This, in turn, made her acutely aware of the potential for (media art) technology to act as a similar form of (cultural) extraction. She was also sensitive to the problem of an artist being perceived as "parachuting in" and "extracting"[69] images of the forest, while either tokenizing or altogether ignoring First Nations' relationships to and beliefs about the land. With *Aerial*, Sujir set out to create an artwork as the expression of genuine respect and friendship—friendship was therefore adopted as a central method.

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65 Sujir, conversation with author, March 2, 2020.

66 Bill Jones, email to author, March 3, 2020.

67 Sujir, conversation with author, March 2, 2020.

68 The themes of displacement, home, and the continuities and discontinuities of living between and across two cultures are often touched upon in Sujir's work. See, for example, Haema Sivanesan, "Leila Sujir," in *Rebellious: Alberta Women Artists in the 1980s,* ed. Lindsey Sharman (Edmonton: Art Gallery of Alberta, 2020), 82–83.

69 Sujir, conversation with author, March 30, 2020.

The cultural theorist Lisa M. Tillmann-Healy writes, "With friendship as method, a project's issues emerge organically, in the ebb and flow of everyday life: leisurely walks, household projects, activist campaigns, separations, losses, recoveries. The unfolding path of the relationships becomes the path of the project."[70] This certainly describes the process that Sujir embarked upon. *Aerial* developed as a result of long conversations with Jones in a number of settings: while sitting in the forest or at the beach listening to his stories, during long drives to the nearest town to run errands, over community lunches at the reserve or in the village of Port Renfrew, or while visiting the reserve or the local elementary school with various members of the PFN community. These seemingly mundane and everyday interactions allowed Sujir's relationship with Jones and the PFN community to develop, and for the community to assess the artist's intentions. It allowed the artist to build a relationship of trust and rapport, not just with Jones but also with various members of the PFN community, and for the community to gain an insight into Sujir as a person and the motivations underscoring her work.

Fig. 9. *Community screening, Port Renfrew Elementary School, 2018. Organized by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Photo: Regan Shrumm.*

70 Lisa M. Tillmann-Healy, "Friendship as Method," *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 5 (October 2003): 735, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403254894. Compare this with the Indigenous decolonial concept of visiting as methodology in Janice Cindy Gaudet, "Keeoukaywin: The Visiting Way—Fostering an Indigenous Research Methodology," *Aboriginal Policy Studies* 7, no. 2 (2019): 47–64.

Tillmann-Healy elaborates that, according to this method,

> Friendship is an interpersonal bond characterized by the ongoing communicative management of dialectical tensions, such as those between affection and instrumentality, expressiveness and protectiveness, and judgment and acceptance. … In friends, we seek trust, honesty, respect, commitment, safety, support, generosity, loyalty, mutuality, constancy, understanding, and acceptance. … When friendships do cross social groups, the bonds take on political dimensions.[71]

Friendship thus presupposes accountability. Sujir wanted to build a process by which to create an artwork that was accountable to the PFN and which recognized their cultural view of the forest. In turn, this accountability ensured an "authentic" transcultural process: a process by which the artist desired to reflect the PFN's cultural view of the forest back to them by way of her own artistic language. She regarded this transcultural picturing as an ethical responsibility in the spirit of (re)conciliation.[72]

Fig. 10. *Community screening at the Pacheedaht Reserve, 2019. L to R: Elder Bill Jones and Chief Jeff Jones with* Forest! *technical director, Jorge Zavagno. Photo: Haema Sivanesan.*

71 Tillmann-Healy, "Friendship as Method," 1–3.

72 Sujir, conversation with author, January 20, 2021.

The shoot for *Aerial* was followed a few days later by a screening of video rushes held at the local school gym. Invitations were extended to members of the Port Renfrew and neighboring communities and to the Pacheedaht Band Council and community on the reserve.[73] Community members were also invited to join the artist for lunch. Throughout the half-day screening, Sujir explained her vision for the work, the process, and her intentions, while also soliciting feedback and engaging in discussions with various stakeholders. The following winter, Sujir returned again to screen her almost finished work on the reserve and to meet with the Chief, the Band Manager, and Bill Jones. A close to complete version of *Aerial* was screened for the first time for the PFN community on a flatscreen and through a virtual reality headset.

The artist explained that she felt "a sense of necessity" to bring the work back to the PFN to consult with them prior to completion.[74] Sujir set aside or suspended her own personal ideas and the values she ascribed to the forest, in favor of listening to and accounting for the perspectives of the First Nation. In doing so, she developed a collaborative process that was not participatory but instead consultative. The artist made a significant effort to share her work-in-progress with the First Nations community on numerous occasions. She strove to solicit feedback; to meet and talk with the Band Manager, the Chief, and the community; and to incorporate their comments and insights back into the creative process in accordance with an ethics of respect, transparency, and social accountability. This process ensured the integrity of the work. As the project developed, the work met with the interest, delight, and enthusiasm of the PFN.

Prior to finalizing the work for its premiere screening as part of a film festival in Toronto, Sujir invited the PFN to provide a text to be incorporated into the video to conclude the work. The text reads as follows,

> [K]axi:ks is the traditional name for Walbran
> Walbran—Pacheedaht First Nation unceded traditional territory
> "The forest is a holy place to pray and ask the forest what it wants you to have. Take from it what it gives you. Give back what you do not need.
> Seek quiet and spiritual guidance.
> It is our life and nurtures all, going between the ocean and the land.

73 Leila Sujir, *Forest Breath: A Portrait in Progress,* 2018, film. This screening was organized as an off-site community outreach and engagement program by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. See "Video Screening with Leila Sujir, Forest Breath: A Portrait in Progress," *Art Gallery of Greater Victoria*, accessed March 19, 2020, https://aggv.ca/events/video-screening-leila-sujir-forest-breath-a-stereoscopic-3d-video.

74 Leila Sujir and Jorge Zavagno, conversation with author, January 20, 2021.

We are dependent on the forests forever."
Pacheedaht First Nation.[75]

Fig. 11. *Leila Sujir,* Aerial (2019)*. Large format video, 10.15 mins. Video still. Courtesy of the artist.*

This text inscribes Sujir's visual depiction of the South Walbran forest with the words and beliefs of the First Nation, bringing their Indigenous voices to bear on its representation. The artist drew on a methodology of friendship to produce a work that, in its own way, is a move from a habituated settler colonial point of view to an "epistemology of empowerment,"[76] recognizing and foregrounding the voice and agency of the PFN.

Aerial therefore manifests the forest as a video space inscribed by Indigenous knowledge. Its visual language transgresses the typically Eurocentric terms of Canadian art, conforming to its conventions (of experimentation, collaboration, innovation, production values, etc.) but subverting its framing, gaze, and narrative to privilege an Indigenous position. Nor is the work defined by (or appropriating) the rubrics or iconographies of Indigenous art. What *Aerial* does, then—and what the artist has achieved by way of a long consultative and reflexive process of working with the Indigenous community—is to symbolically repatriate the South Walbran forest to the PFN, in a move towards unsettling the settler imaginary. In the spirit of friendship, the work also stands as a gift to the PFN in reciprocity of their trust.

75 Leila Sujir, *Aerial,* 2019, film.

76 Tillmann-Healy, "Friendship as Method," 5.

Friendship and collaboration in the contact zone

If *Forest Breath* enabled Sujir to establish certain shared values of the forest, *Aerial* marks where her collaboration with the PFN begins. *Aerial* coordinates Sujir's perspective of the forest with an Indigenous one and establishes a mode of working that demonstrates a commitment to a relationship of trust. These two video works establish the preliminary groundwork for the overarching *Forest!* project, which proposes to bring together invited artists, curators, scientists, and activists with the PFN as a key partner and stakeholder.[77] Taking the PFN's 400-year view of the cedar forest as a starting point, *Forest!* proposes to examine notions of home/land, the sentience of the forest, the concept of mother trees,[78] and ideas of healing as key terms that describe issues of a mutual, cross-cultural concern and regard for the forest.

To this end, while acknowledging and respecting the distinct and sovereign cultures of First Nations communities, Sujir's project thereby reframes Marie Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone, defined as

> the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.[79]

Rather than conceiving of the contact zone as a transactional site that perpetuates cultural inequities, contentions, and antagonisms as Pratt does, Sujir's project posits the potential of the contact zone as a site of shared values, exchange, transparency, and accountability. The contact zone, as Sujir enacts it through her working process to date, may be described as the co-presencing (that is, a close occurrence and alignment) of diverse and divergent worldviews, values, and meanings in order to produce a new imaginary: a new form of alliance or coalition of ideas and epistemologies outside, or apart from, a nationalist one.

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77 The expanded *Forest!* project is conceived of as an interdisciplinary and transcultural research-creation project with outcomes including interdisciplinary workshops, community engagement programs, a forest field school, and new artworks, exhibitions, and publications. Key partners and collaborators include researchers at Concordia University, the Pacheedaht First Nation, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, and the University of British Columbia. This larger project remains at the proposal stage and is yet to be funded.

78 The concept of the mother tree was coined by forest ecologist Suzanne Simard, Professor at University of British Columbia, Vancouver. She is a co-applicant on the *Forest!* SSHRC Partnership Grant. Simard's book, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest,* is forthcoming May 2021.

79 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.

In his important essay "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation," the Metis artist and critic David Garneau considers and problematizes the colonial and missionary foundations that underpin the Canadian use of the term "reconciliation," and advocates the need for spaces of irreconcilability as Indigenous sites of epistemological debate. In articulating the need for such spaces, Garneau recognizes that the concept of reconciliation as proposed by the nation-state "imposes [a] fiction" of "equanitmity," that will never be completely available to Indigenous peoples, just as Indigeneity will never be completely available to settlers.[80] He states,

> These spaces are irreconcilable in the sense that their function depends upon a difference from Settlers. It is axiomatic that their contents are not candidates for reconciliatory discourse. They are also irreconcilable in that they do not have a mythology that places them in previous seamless accord with Settlers or a theory that proposes a future other than one of perpetual struggle with the dominant.[81]

Garneau does, however, concede to spaces of *conciliation* in which "sharing in a discourse about histories, responsibility, and transformation among artworks and with other human beings is a corrective to the colonial desire for settlement."[82] Thus, rather than conceiving of community and collaboration as a process and product of "shared values and experiences," the concept of the contact zone as Sujir practices it provides for the possibility of examining the affinities between and across cultures meeting at the boundary of shared terms—such as "home," "land," "Mother," "healing," or "sentience"—at the same time that it respects and provides space for "irreconcilability" in the sense of Garneau's notion of the "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality."[83]

This reframing of the contact zone, as suggested by Sujir's project, could therefore be one such space of conciliation, intended to respect the cultural sovereignty of Indigenous nations and to acknowledge culturally specific concepts, meanings, and usages of terms related to the forest while exploring the affinities, shared values, and potential relationships underpinning these terms. Sujir's intention is therefore not to seek to assimilate or accommodate a First Nation's perspective into a settler colonial worldview—the notion of the contact zone necessarily acknowledges that these are sites of tension—but the contact zone has also the potential to be understood as a site of difference *and* sharing.

80 Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces," 34.

81 Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces," 34.

82 Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces," 38.

83 Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces," 37.

By bringing together artists and researchers connected by their various yet interconnected understandings of the sentience of the forest, Sujir's project begins to map out how Indigenous beliefs and worldviews can sit side-by-side with certain progressive, settler, and immigrant ideas of the forest, producing a provisional field of mutually supportive meanings and concepts. In this way, her project explores whether "culturally adjacent" or mutually held cultural values ascribed to certain terms regarding the forest—for example, the concept of the forest as Mother—might assist in complementing, supporting, and even amplifying traditional systems of Indigenous knowledge.

This reframing of the contact zone as according to a methodology of friendship or conciliation situates an ongoing and somewhat open-ended process of dialogue and collaboration between and among settler, immigrant, and Indigenous protagonists, in order to investigate concepts of land, place, home, and healing, and to unsettle prevailing meanings of the forest as promoted by the settler state. Most importantly, as *Forest!* expands to include diverse participants, it will attempt to reconfigure social relations with Indigenous peoples by holding participants first and foremost accountable to Sujir's methodology of friendship, regardless of any external pressure to deliver outcomes in the form of research or exhibitions.

In some ways, Sujir's methodology of friendship is aligned with concepts of Indigenous "allyship," a commonly used term in anti-oppression and educational contexts to refer to the work of non-Indigenous people committed to the work of "Indigenization."[84] But where the concept of allyship takes on connotations of political solidarity around Indigenization as a social justice "cause," often as a polemical and prescriptive corrective to the abuses and injustices of colonization, friendship proposes an interpersonal commitment or bond. While allyship, in practice, conforms to a binary dialectic set up by the colonial project—of oppression/anti-oppression, injustice/justice, wrong/right—and thus risks substituting one colonizing hegemony for another, it leaves no space for irreconcilability, those necessary spaces of Indigenous autonomy and agency. The difference between allyship and friendship is then perhaps related to methodological modes of operation and accountability: whereas allyship, a term primarily directed towards colonial institutions, demands that the "white, privileged oppressor" be accountable for the injustices and disadvantages imposed on Indigenous peoples—an expectation that, as Garneau suggests, describes an impossibility—friendship presumes person-to-person accountability, as

84 The concept of allyship is outlined in numerous educational toolkits, including some aimed at the academy. See, for example, Asma-na-hi Antoine, Rachel Mason, Roberta Mason, Sophia Palahicky, and Carmen Rodriguez de France, *Pulling Together: A Guide for Curriculum Developers* (Victoria: BC Campus, 2018), accessed March 30, 2020, https://opentextbc.ca/indigenizationcurriculumdevelopers/chapter/being-an-ally/.

is inherent to its terms. Friendship or conciliation describes a more fluid, self-aware, open-ended process: a relational praxis.

What is emerging through this research-creation process, then, is a spectrum of terms and heuristic working methods concerned with the lived reality of putting the concept of (re)conciliation into action, where (re)conciliation is not merely a checklist of legal and political goals aimed at colonial institutions to atone for past abuses, but rather a moral, person-to-person obligation towards seeking consent from Indigenous peoples; getting to know each other; learning about and from one another; instituting a process of building terms of shared understanding within boundaries of cultural safety, or in accordance with cultural limits; and the possibility of challenging and complicating the unconscious biases inherent to the settler imaginary.

To this end, the contemporary Canadian art world context, which has been by and large artist-driven and publicly funded since the 1960s, is intended to promote a social purpose. The Canadian art system, itself a critique of traditional art world models, which are typically market driven and grounded in novel, aesthetic expressions and the so-called "genius" of individual artists, has long resisted the commodification of art forms.[85] Instead, it privileges experimental approaches, new technologies, engagement with social questions, and the creation of spaces for marginalized voices, positions, and practices. This self-reflexive, grassroots-driven system encourages various forms of collectivity, peer-to-peer exchange, and cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary collaboration, while also considering the visual arts as a site and form of research. In Canada, the visual arts serve as a context for community building and as a means to encourage social cohesion within a culturally diverse settler population. It is a system that, though claiming a social purpose and claiming to account for cultural diversity, privileges positions in relation to a Western art paradigm, i.e., referring to Western epistemologies and critical and aesthetic canons, supporting individualism within a community of practice, and supporting professionalism as endorsed by a system of peer recognition. While the Canadian art system is progressive in its social orientation, it does not fully account for the role and purpose of art in non-Western (immigrant, diasporic) and Indigenous contexts. Improving opportunities for the inclusion of these artistic paradigms is an ongoing aim of artistic, academic, and policy research, discussion, and advocacy. This advocacy requires an ongoing and seemingly interminable process of uncovering, challenging, and rehabilitating a range of deeply held colonialist views and Eurocentric norms, and demands a range of strategies and critical positions in sometimes heated and contentious contexts. Contrary to this, while Sujir's project contributes to this ongoing

85 See, for example, A. A. Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists," in *Museums by Artists*, ed. A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 29–37.

advocacy and is intended to produce new knowledge and new terms of cultural understanding, it does so in a way that is disarming.

As an expanded research-creation project, *Forest!* seeks to produce the South Walbran forest as a post-nationalist imaginary responsible to the terms of (re)conciliation. Learning from the forest as a model and site of the cooperation of diverse forms and species—i.e. as a reframed contact zone—and working with key terms held in common between the project's diverse collaborators, *Forest!* explores affinities between and across systems of cultural knowledge to propose a new cultural awareness or understanding of the forest. In this way, *Forest!* engages in a practice of "re-worlding" in accordance with the concept of "worlding" as proposed by Monica Juneja, describing an "inhabited place, … situatedness, … marked by lived features, memories, relationships that provide a context, while they undergo change":[86] that is, as a practice of (re)claiming sites and spaces once rendered unavailable to the Indigenous or immigrant imaginary, given a long history of Eurocentric picturing. Thus, Sujir seeks to reinscribe the forest with alternate or subaltern meanings, proposing (an)other set of terms by which this landscape can be cared for, shared, imagined, and understood.

86 Monica Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea…': Art History, Transculturation, and World-Making—With and Beyond the Nation," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 81 (2018): 461–485; 463.