

E kitsc-kt ne pésellkwe, me7 mellelc-kt.

(When we get to the lake, we will rest.)

An exploration of reconnection, displacement and animacy.

By

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BFA, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, 2023

A THESIS SUPPORT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2025



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Abstract

This thesis explores how my experiences of displacement and reconnection—together with an acknowledgment of the animacy of land, water, and more-than-human beings—can be expressed through installation art (encompassing sound, video, text, and cedar beings) in ways that reshape my sense of belonging. Centered on my relationship with Little Shuswap Lake, this thesis traces a physical and spiritual return to land and water from which I was separated. Three main projects, *a feeling of mine* (2024), *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024), and *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025), chronologically reveal different facets of this journey.

I reference writings from Robin Wall Kimmerer and Graham Harvey to ground my understanding in animacy, also drawing on artists Sonny Assu, Rebecca Belmore, Jay White, and Nam June Paik to highlight parallels in longing, site specificity and self-reflection. *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025) seeks to combine each experience and part of this journey into an intimate space that invites others to think of their connection to land, water and story.

Key words: reconnection, displacement, animacy

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Secúlecwem (Land is recognized)

The land Emily Carr University occupies is wet with memories often forgotten. I hope that this artwork and this accompanying thesis support document allows space for others to connect with the land and water with every part of themselves, because *E kitsc-kt ne pésellkwe, me7 méllelc-kt* (*When we get to the lake, we will rest.*) lives within this university, seeking to ground others in the connection between land, water and memory.

I am from Tk'emlups te Secwepemc (Kamloops) and I create artwork on the three host nations of xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) as a guest. This is the context in which I would like this thesis to be read.

Kukwtseětsemc (Thank you) to these host nations, to my cohort, and to my supervisors Lindsay McIntyre and Peter Bussigel, for always making me feel welcomed and heard. To my internal reviewer, Matilda Aslizadeh, for sharing amazing artists with me and to my external reviewer, Tsēmā Igharas, for generously making time to engage with my thesis. To my instructors, whose guidance has shaped my work thus far—and will continue to do so beyond this moment. To my mother for always being there for my health and mind, travelling to see me with home made meals; you are special. To my partner for being a helping hand, always along for the ride, like warm sand stuck to wet skin. And to my best friends, no matter how near or far, for always bringing joy into my life.

Again, to all of you—thank you for supporting the transformation of my art practice and for offering me a true sense of belonging.

Tetlétkwe (calm waters)

With each breath I take, my chest rises and falls with my first swim in Little Shuswap Lake. That's all I have to do to keep afloat, as the gentle waves carry me effortlessly away from the shore. The muffled hum from the water that covers my ears puts any anxious thoughts to rest. The sun warms my wet skin that surfaces with every inhale, quickly drying it before exhaling, where the water pools back onto me. Swaying and bobbing between the realms of the warm sky and calm water, this moment within Little Shuswap Lake is the first time I have ever been held by water so carefully. It feels as if I am being cradled within the arms of a loved one, suspended in time. The cycle of breaths, sun, and waves heals me—I feel at home.



Figure 1. Video still from *When we get to the lake, we will rest*. (2025) Naomi Watkins.

I invite readers to join me on a road trip—not just in the sense of traveling along highways and backroads, but in the sense of crossing the intersections of displacement and reconnection.

Displacement describes the experience of being separated—physically, culturally, or emotionally—from one’s homeland or sense of rooted belonging. Within this thesis, displacement frames my own journey of reconnection, highlighting how growing up away from my nation has influenced my search for identity and connection to land.

When I write of a “road trip” or “journey” I refer to both the drive (fig.1) that appears in my thesis artwork, *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025), and the personal reflections of reconnecting with the land, water and stories that have shaped me and my practice during this MFA program.

Throughout this thesis, I share my experiences with Little Shuswap Lake, revealing that I have met my late grandmother within its waters. From here on, I will refer to Little Shuswap Lake as *Her* and *She*, as *She* is the one who reminded me of my story—of displacement, and reconnection with my Indigeneity within my work and myself. Each visit with *Her* is documented as personal reflections marked in blue throughout this thesis. These personal reflections not only acknowledge these experiences, but also reflect my growth and change throughout this artistic process.

When creating and writing about my artwork and experiences, I do so through the lens of reconnection, replicating the spaces of intimacy experienced through the stories shared between *Her* and I. The gradual connection I formed with *Her* reflects the process of developing the three components of my thesis project: *a feeling of mine* (2024), *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024), and *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025). Each of these artworks serves as a means of deepening my understanding of connection to land, water, and story while navigating the displacement I experienced growing up away from my nation.

The framework of this thesis and thesis artwork look to accomplish how the experience of my displacement and reconnection—together with an acknowledgment of the animacy of land, water, and more-than-human beings—can be expressed through installation art (encompassing sound, video, text, and cedar beings) in ways that reshape my sense of belonging.

By “animacy,” I refer to the idea that more-than-human beings—such as land, trees, and water—carry a living, active presence or spirit rather than existing as mere objects. In the context of this thesis, this means recognizing them as beings with whom one can form reciprocal relationships and experience emotional resonance.

I write about my exploration of artistic methods and three artwork components of this thesis; relating them to ideas around displacement, reconnection and animacy. My understanding of animacy draws on the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer and Graham Harvey, while ideas of site specificity, peripatetic methods¹ and reconnection are influenced by artists Rebecca Belmore, Jay White and Tozer Pak Sheung Chuen. I further explore displacement in dialogue with Sonny Assu's practice through the use of cedar beings in his work *Longing and Becoming* (2011). To contextualize my experiments and methods, I refer to the work of James Lavadour, Stephen Nachmanovitch and Nam June Paik, aiming to form a collective perspective on displacement, reconnection, and art-making that I intend to expand on future work.

Much like a long drive, this thesis project is not about reaching a destination, as I believe this journey has no end, but about the unexpected insights, the stops and starts, and the teachings encountered along the way. By presenting my explorations in painting, performance, carving and sound—I trace a path from uncertainty to a deeper understanding of belonging as we reach to *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025).

¹ An approach shaped by traveling or moving between locations.

Sepsyúlecw (moss covering on an earth surface)



Figure 2. Digital photo from road trip (2011) Naomi Watkins.

Looking at mosses adds a depth and intimacy to knowing the forest. Walking in the woods, and discerning the presence of a species from fifty paces away, just by its color, connects me strongly to the place. That certain green, the way it catches the light, gives away its identity, like recognizing the walk of a friend before you can see their face... Intimacy gives us a different way of seeing, when visual acuity is not enough. (Robin Wall Kimmerer pg 13)

I position myself between the realms of the warm sky and calm water through a continuous journey of self-discovery. This journey carries the warmth of connection and memory, one that embraces vulnerability in exploring displacement and reconnection. Like moss

quietly anchoring itself to stone, this exploration is rooted in encounters that grow through attentiveness and care. Although my art practice stems from a desire to express these experiences, vulnerability has always been difficult. I have often kept these experiences to myself due to the awkward suspension between my nation and home, where my spirit—the source of passion and purpose—felt displaced.

I did not grow up knowing I was Indigenous or where I was from. As a child, my conscious connection to land was muddled; I longed to become a body of water or a patch of moss. Despite having little knowledge of my Indigeneity at the time, a road trip (fig.2) with my family introduced me to stories of my nation. Their importance was unclear, as I was young, but I played outside with these new ideas—being healed by the sun, sliding down dirt hills. In retrospect, these were teachings gifted by land. The desire to become water, moss, or earth was a subconscious acknowledgment of the animacy that land and stories hold.

Potawatomi botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer's quote on moss and intimacy resonates with my childhood longing to merge with land—before I knew the history of my ancestry, I felt a natural closeness to nature, a desire to dissolve into it, to belong. This intimacy, as Kimmerer mentions, comes from time spent looking and listening, engaging deeply with place. Similarly, my work seeks to foster this sense of intimacy—not only within myself but also in how it engages others, particularly through my video installation in *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025), where I invite viewers into an experience of quiet reflection and reconnection.

I've come to see that intimacy is closely connected to vulnerability. I have struggled with sharing these deeply personal experiences, yet I recognize that storytelling is itself an act of humility. In an interview, Kimmerer states:

I think that sharing stories... is an act of humility. It's an example of showing that 'I have something to share here, and you do too, and that all of our stories matter.' That's what I mean by humility, when we share our stories and they connect or sometimes not with our audiences, it invites their stories. (online interview)

In this way, my work and exploration of displacement is an invitation to others who may also seek reconnection, who may also feel the effects of displacement, and who may recognize something familiar in the intimacy of shared experience.

As I move forward in this thesis, I will continue to examine these themes of animacy and displacement—articulating them not only through writing but also through the presence of materials, movement, and sound in my work. Through cedar, video installation, and the sound embedded within these materials, I aim to create a space where these concepts can be experienced. Through this, I hope to bridge the distance between land and body, between past and present, between longing and belonging.

Experience and Painting



Figure 3. Rooted (2022) Naomi Watkins.

Since I was a child, I often experienced moments of unexpected connection within natural places—seeing familiar faces in the patterns of tree bark (fig.3), as if the trees held echoes of loved ones. The boundaries between myself and the environment seemed to blur in these moments. The spaces and beings in them felt alive in a way that was hard to explain. I've also had dreams of vivid natural places, places so detailed and real that I woke up with a sense of having been there, even though the landscapes were unlike anything I could describe.



Figure 4. *Waiting for a Friend (without Appointment) (2007—2007)* Tozer Pak Sheung Chuen
Figure removed due to copyright restrictions and can be found [here](#).

During my undergraduate degree at Emily Carr University, I started expressing these experiences through landscape paintings. By methods of walking and looking, I would paint spaces that caught my eye, spending time within them and getting to know these spaces, especially the trees within them. In a video on Hong Kong artist Tozer Pak Sheung Chuen work *Waiting for a Friend (without Appointment) (2007—2007)* (fig.4) both a performance and documented photographic series where Chuen waits at selected areas with the motive of seeing how long it would take to see someone he knew, or for all of the buildings lights to turn off. Chuen describes wandering the city as “like writing poems. When I walk past certain places, I might see a scene and capture it. It’s like finding beautiful words in a poem that can describe the scene. But my work is not poetry. My work is created through intervention, so my actions are like lines in a poem.” (0:11-0:40) Like Pak, my practice involves walking as a way to connect with place, but his description of encountering a scene as if it has been transcribed into a poem reflects how I experience connection with land—moments when everything becomes clear, like seeing scattered letters in alphabet soup suddenly form a word. Pak’s idea of intervention also resonates with my work, which serves as an intervention in my own displacement—revisiting

Her, building a connection with *Her*, and driving to my nation as a way of confronting both displacement and reconnection seen in *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025).



Figure 5. *Bleeding Heart* (2024) James Lavadour.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions and can be found [here](#).

Whatever is in the earth is in me and whatever is in me is what I make art out of. I view making art as an expressive event of nature and a transfiguration of the experiences of living.
(James Lavadour 177)

The words of American painter and Walla Walla tribe member James Lavadour resonate with me, particularly his description of art as “the experiences of living.” Like Lavadour, I was painting landscapes as a way to express my spiritual connections to land. However, over time, I realized that the medium was not conveying the depth of my experiences. Though I am no longer painting landscapes, my practice remains rooted in those beginnings. In *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025), the painted walls of the installation are painted to reflect the color of the water in the final scene of my video piece. This calls back to the origin of my artistic practice, while also marking the transformation of it through this thesis project.

Lavadour's paintings (fig.5) are abstract, layered, and expressive, using transparency and gesture to depict landscapes that exist beyond representation. His irritation with the way his work was sometimes interpreted as "apocalyptic landscapes" (Lavadour 177) is something I deeply relate to.

Similarly, my paintings were often misread, their spiritual themes overlooked or misunderstood. My intention was never to simply depict land, but to express an experience of spiritual connection with it. Despite my efforts, I felt constrained by the limitations of paint on a flat surface. The frustration of this misinterpretation led me to explore new mediums in search of a more impactful way to communicate my connection to land, memory, and spirituality.

My first visit with *Her*², during the second semester of this degree program, renewed my motivation to continue creating art about spiritual connection to land through different forms. It also helped me understand the nature of my connection as something deeper than belief, as it was experience. In John Reid's *The Power of Animism*, he explains this difference, referring to an article he read of someone disputing the "belief" of Ngāi Tahu and Aoraki, which is a sacred Maori story. "The insight he gave me was a word he used, and that was the word belief. He said Ngāi Tahu believed Aoraki was an ancestor. Now, Ngāi Tahu didn't believe Aoraki was an ancestor; Ngāi Tahu experienced the mountain as an ancestor, and that's a big difference. There's a difference between experience and belief." (2:18-2:38)

This distinction is helpful to understanding my work. The land, trees, and water I painted were never just subjects; they were beings I had formed relationships with. Painting them was comparable to painting a friend I had come to know intimately. This idea ties back to Robin Wall Kimmerer's reflections on moss; just as she describes the ability to recognize a species of moss from a distance as a form of intimacy, my act of painting was an extension of my own intimacy

² See blue text on pg 6 under Tetlétkwe (calm waters)

with these beings. It was not a matter of belief in animacy but an experience of it—an understanding cultivated through presence, observation, and connection.



Figure 6. *Untitled* (2023) Naomi Watkins.

During the first semester of this MFA program, before I met with *Her*, I decided to continue with landscape painting. Having a large space to work in, I figured I could push myself further in conveying these experiences by creating a large-scale painting, incorporating sound, and referencing an area within the city I connected with instead of natural spaces. Working on *Untitled* (2023) (Fig.6), I wanted to convey the animism within a city space and create an immersive experience for viewers through scale. The vaguely recognizable architecture within East Vancouver would invite viewers to engage with the scene, possibly experiencing what I felt when I first visited that space.

Untitled (2023) is a 12x7 ft oil on panel painting depicting a side of a building at night. Two doorways glow as the lights above them softly illuminate the sidewalk, revealing the gravel

and patches of grass in front of the entrances. The scale immediately immerses viewers, filling their vision when viewed closely, while from a distance, the size of the doorways creates the illusion of real ones. In this piece, animism is conveyed through the environmental sounds of buzzing lights, chimes swaying in the wind, and the sound of footsteps shifting gravel. I recorded audio from the depicted location, mixed and looped these environmental sounds, and played them on two speakers positioned on either side of the painting. These sounds oscillated between the speakers, mimicking the fluidity of life that surrounded me when I first stumbled upon this space in East Vancouver.

The underpainting was done in Nickel Azo Gold, a vibrant orange that contrasts the cool tones of the painting. This orange exists throughout the painting as a way to represent the spiritual presence I connected with in that space, as the orange's vibrancy relates to the eye-catching moment I had when I felt a deeper connection than what is physically there, even if it was slight. It subtly seeps through parts of the sidewalk and lingers beneath the thin layers of paint in the entrances of the building, revealing itself through the glass door and within the interior.

Creating *Untitled* (2023) was an experiment to see how sound could assist painting in conveying spiritual connection and animism. After receiving feedback in a class critique, I found that while the work successfully created an immersive space, the personal spiritual connection I wanted to express did not fully translate for viewers through the orange or the sound. This realization made it clear that if I wanted to communicate my own experiences, I needed to move away from ambiguous methods and become more intentional in my approach to conveying spiritual connection with land.

As my work developed, sound became an essential component, influencing later projects such as *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025). The video component features the sound of a car traveling to my nation, while the cedar carvings accompanying it emit sound

that reflects their animacy. This use of sound echoes *Untitled* (2023) in its site-specificity, as both works incorporate sounds from the locations they represent. However, in *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025), this approach is expanded by including the presence of the cedar beings alongside their site-specific sounds. These shifts in my practice demonstrate a continued exploration of animacy and connection through multiple mediums, each refining my ability to express what was once elusive through painting alone.

Séyse (to play)



Figure 7. *do we really need naomi?* (2024) Naomi Watkins.

Wanting to experiment with different mediums, I continued my exploration of sound in a more playful direction. Rather than attempting to recreate past experiences, I wanted to test how a real-time approach could create a shared experience. What began as a lighthearted experiment, a “prank” on my cohort, quickly evolved into a realization about the role of intuition and improvisation in my practice.

My plan was to record knocking noises and play them through a speaker hidden inside a plinth in the critique space, requesting ahead of time that my critique begin without me, creating the illusion that I was inside the plinth, only to reveal myself by walking into the room. However, due to last-minute technical issues, I had to improvise. In a moment of panic, I quickly laid out a few white plinths, undressed, and draped my clothes over them before hiding inside one (fig.7).

I assumed my absence would be interpreted as *the vanishing of Naomi*, maybe leading my cohort to believe I was running naked through the building. As they wondered where I was, my professor asked, “Do we really need Naomi?” sparking a discussion about performance,

presence, and viewing artwork without the artist physically there. One person eventually approached the plinth I was hiding in and curiously poked a finger through one of its ventilation holes. When I reached out and touched their finger in response, their shock rippled through the room, transforming the space into an interactive moment shared among the viewers.

At the time, I did not consider this a performance. However, the technical failure forced me into a space of instinctive decision making, where I responded to the moment rather than planning my actions. The urgency of the situation stripped away overthinking, allowing for an intuitive engagement with materials and space. This spontaneity led me to realize that my presence, or absence, within the work could be just as significant as the materials themselves. The performance extended beyond my individual experience; it became a shared moment, reinforcing Robin Wall Kimmerer's idea that storytelling and humility invite others into the narrative.

This moment also introduced me to the potential of play as a method of creation. In *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, Stephen Nachmanovitch explains:

Full-blown artistic creativity takes place when a trained and skilled grown-up is able to tap the source of clear, unbroken play-consciousness of the small child within. This consciousness has a particular feel and flow we instinctively recognize. It is 'like tossing a ball on swift slowing water: moment-to-moment nonstop flow.' (48)

This idea of unbroken flow resonates with the way this piece unfolded. There was no time for careful planning, only movement and response. Similarly, Nachmanovitch writes:

Play is the taproot from which original art springs; it is the raw still that the artist channels and organizes with all his learning and technique. Technique itself springs from play, because we can acquire techniques only by the practice of practice, by persistently experimenting and

playing with our tools and testing their limits and resistances. Creative work is play; it is free speculation using the materials of one's chosen form. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves. Artists play with color and space. Musicians play with sound and silence. Eros plays with lovers. God plays with the universe. Children play with everything they can get their hands on.
(Free Play 42)

This understanding of play as a way of creating, or artistic process, mirrors the role improvisation has played in my practice. The necessity of quick thinking during *do we really need naomi?* (2024) revealed that stressful problem solving can lead to authentic and unexpected creative breakthroughs. The experience disrupted my attachment to rigid artistic methods, much like how my earlier frustrations with landscape painting led me to seek new ways of expressing spiritual connection. Through this, I also began to see improvisation not just as a reaction to limitations, but as a technique in itself, one that could be practiced, refined, and intentionally incorporated into my work.

The realization that presence, absence, and sound could create immersive experiences carried forward into my later works, particularly *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025). The cedar beings in this piece do not hold a narrative in the way the video component does, but rather function as invitations, offering sound as an experience rather than a prescribed meaning. This connects back to the experiment in *do we really need naomi?* (2024), where the interaction between my body, the space, and my audience created an experience that was open ended and participatory.

Tektskéłqwem (carving)



Figure 8. *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024) Naomi Watkins.

ancestors are often understood to be or have become transformed into elements of the world, especially of particular people's surrounding scenery, landscape and community. They have become hills, winds, animals and so on... (Graham Harvey 129)

During the summer after first year, I wanted to continue the journey of discovering new materials and experimenting with how I could more effectively speak to my experiences of displacement and connection to land. Realigning my sights towards these experiences, carving cedar felt like the most appropriate medium. I had worked with cedar before, but only briefly.

Carving cedar became even more meaningful when I reflected on my earliest experiences with it. At the beginning of my education at Emily Carr University in 2019, I had experimented with cedar while listening to the audiobook version of *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Now, I was returning to it with a greater sense of purpose, using cedar I

had kept from just east of Kamloops, the place where I first began engaging with Indigenous communities and learning more about my connection to land. The act of carving itself became a practice of remembrance and reconnection, a way to engage with both material and story.

On the drive to pick up my cedar and start carving, I passed a small opening in the trees along the bend of the highway, between Squilax and Chase, leading to *Her*. It had been a couple of years since I last visited *Her*, and as the heat of the summer bore down, all I could think of was the relief of jumping into the water.

Rocks shifting under my feet, small clumps of sand sticking to my skin; the ground warm. Holding my tongue, I slowly glide into the cold water until I can no longer touch the ground then float onto my back and wet my scalp, staring at the clouds above me. I feel held again by arms I have felt before. The clouds shift into shapes I can only recognize as birds. I tuck my chin in and look at the mountain ahead and feel my grandmother's presence, even though I have never met her, or seen her. I know she drowned and that she lived here. I know this is her.

Trying to take in this moment, reflecting on the cloud birds, mountain, water, and my grandmother, I recalled stories I had been told about water holding memory, about people being created from sand, about birds as shapeshifters and spiritual messengers—beings who exist between the living and other realms. In *Animism: respecting the living world*, scholar Graham Harvey writes, “one sign of a powerful person³ is the ability to transform or appear in different shapes. Thunderbirds might usually appear as clouds or birds but can visit humans in human form (especially during visions or dreams).” (49)

This echoed his writing that ancestors often become part of the landscape—hills, winds, animals, and more—reinforcing my realization that land and water hold spiritual presence, making the ancestral connection to land a living, breathing reality. This epiphany washed over me: these stories, told to me during that initial road trip when I was 11 years old, were not just distant narratives. They were a part of me, embedded in my own experiences and in my ancestral connection to land. Perhaps these were *Her* stories, passed to me through the water, through memory.

In recalling my earlier readings of John Reid’s insight on experience versus belief, I recognized that the sense of my *Her* presence was not rooted in mere belief; rather, it was an experience—lived, felt, and embodied. Reid distinguishes between believing something to be true and experiencing it as reality. Similarly, I have never simply “believed” that the lake was alive or that *She* was speaking to me through its waters; instead, I felt this animacy in a direct, tangible way. It is this felt experience that underpins my carving process. Each cut into the cedar strings another web of connection, the kind of connection that emerges from a deep relational encounter with land. Graham Harvey writes:

³ In *Animism: respecting the living world*, Harvey describes “person” as human and more-than-human beings. (xi)

It is not, after all, shape or form that determines whether the animate or inanimate gender is applied, but personal encounters. It is necessary to learn (throughout life) appropriate and empowering ways of relating... In relating with others, humans gain access to increased knowledge and power, and are empowered to live well. (49)

Though Graham speaks from the idea that an “object” becomes alive by how it is interacted with, I believe that all “objects” have an inherent life, energy or soul. These “personal encounters” only strengthen my relationship and understanding of connection to the water and cedar beings through repeated visits, reflections and experiences.

That was when I truly understood the power of story, not just as a means of preserving knowledge but as a living presence that embeds itself in land and water, waiting to be recognized. The more I reflected, the more I saw that my own experiences with *Her* were deeply intertwined with this larger framework of ancestral storytelling.

Robin Wall Kimmerer speaks to this kind of knowing in her reflections on “more than human teachers”:

I worry a lot about having to figure out the solution to the crisis we are facing... And I wish I had some teachers, and then I remember that I do. And they're more often than not, more than human teachers. Stories to me help our mental health by letting us know that we don't have to figure everything out on our own. When you listen to our stories, more often than not, the protagonists are not humans. They're an owl, they're a fir tree, they're a wolf. These beings are teaching us, and to me that's a profound source of comfort, to say 'well I don't know the answer, but I'm sure that one of my relatives does.' I have great trust in the natural world to help guide me, to me that's a balm to anxiety and uncertainty. To say 'I don't know, but I'm sure my grandma Sugar Maple does.' (Online interview)

This resonates deeply with my experience at Little Shuswap Lake. I had always felt the presence of something larger than myself there, but this was the first time I truly recognized *Her*. The lake, the birds, the mountain—maybe these were my teachers, my ancestors speaking to me through the land.

This realization carried forward into my artistic practice. Now, I wish to explore and share my experiences of *Her* through my artwork, understanding land not just as a space of memory and reconnection, but as a place of story. This perspective is embedded in my works, *a feeling of mine* (2024), *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024), and *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025). These works reflect the way stories, memory, displacement, and reconnection inform my practice, creating spaces where the presence of land can be experienced.

This part of my thesis research and exploration marked a significant shift for me. Truly meeting *Her* for the first time begins to tie back to the animacy I explored at the beginning of my art practice. The lake was not just a setting; it was a being, holding memory, carrying story, and offering guidance. In carving cedar, in shaping material that carries its own history and teachings, I step deeper into this relationship, allowing these stories to shape me just as I shape them.

Qwekwtkwllp (cedar)



Figure 9. *a feeling of mine* (2024) Naomi Watkins

a feeling of mine (2024) (fig. 9) is a video and carving installation, from an earlier part of my journey, that stages a scene of a cedar figure sitting on the ground, gazing at a monitor in front of it. This figure, carved from cedar, represents myself; embodied within the wood, watching the monitor play a looping video of cedar swaying boughs (fig.10), a creek running, and other stills of natural spaces filmed where the cedar I carved was from. Layered over the video is a double exposure of the sun warping as I covered it with my fingers, playing with the distortion of the camera's footage. I filmed the sun from where I grew up, away from my nation, to portray a layer to my nuanced feelings of displacement. The imagery together is intended to evoke the sensation of longing.



Figure 10. Video still from *a feeling of mine* (2024) Naomi Watkins.

The sound that emanates from the monitor is distorted slightly due to the age of its speakers. The noise of crickets and running water blends into the open space where the installation is set. Though not intended, the installation site creates an atmosphere where within silence, the audio of the monitor sounded clear, while student-life droning between classes muted the audio. The crackling and static become part of the work, reinforcing themes of displacement and memory through the fuzziness of the audio and screen. Like the cedar figure watching the monitor, I find myself displaced from the landscapes I feel connected to, observing them from a place of distance.

Cedar, for me, is more than just a material—it is a friend. It marks the beginning of my relationship with Indigenous community. When I refer to land in my writing, cedar is the first being I think of, because of the bond we share. I have used cedar in my practice as a means of reconnection, as it carries the presence of the land from its roots and speaks to the longing I have felt growing up away from my nation. Just as my body displaces the water when I step into

Little Shuswap Lake, the cedar I carve and work with also experiences displacement—it is from the same nation as I am, but has been removed, carved, and placed elsewhere.

Carving a figure from cedar to represent myself is an act of embodiment, reinforcing my connection to this being. The carving remains unfinished, intentionally left within the limits of the trunk, maintaining the integrity of the wood's natural shape. The bare surface exposes the markings made by insects (fig.8), and the gouges in the wood illustrate my own playful interaction with it, revealing the intuitive nature of my process. Without formal training in carving, I allowed myself to explore freely, trusting my hands and the wood to guide me. This recalls my previous work, *do we really need naomi?* (2024), where play and spontaneity became central to my practice.



Figure 11. Wave Sound (2017) Rebecca Belmore.

Here, I draw parallels with Rebecca Belmore's *Wave Sound* (2017) (fig.11), a series of horn-shaped aluminium sculptures which creates a site-specific encounter by focusing on the act of listening within the natural environments they were placed in. As one scholar notes, "Belmore's work often uses sound as a site for an encounter, and here the act of listening becomes a slowing down of time and attention and awareness—an attunement with the land" (52). In *a feeling of mine* (2024), the natural sounds of cedar boughs, a creek, and crickets emanate from the monitor, echoing the site from which both the cedar and I come from. In the context of this quote, the cedar figure might attune to its own environment, mirroring the quiet, attentive position Belmore's work encourages through *Wave Sound* (2017), as people are invited to sit and put their ear up to the sculpture to listen to the ocean.



Figure 12. TV Buddha (1974) Nam June Paik.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions and can be found [here](#).

This installation has also sparked connections around Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* (1974) (fig.12), which portrays a Buddha statue facing a TV that displays its own live image. In that piece, the live video draws attention to the self-reflection I relate to in my practice. *a feeling of mine* (2024) similarly stages a figure and a monitor facing each other, creating an encounter

that can be read as self-reflection. However, as *TV Buddha* (1974) focuses on a literal mirror, a live video, the cedar figure instead observes its ancestral environment. The action of self-reflection in the cedar figure, and myself through the process of making, becomes an environmental introspection of displacement and reconnection—thinking of my connection to land through cedar, site specificity and sound.

While unraveling encounter and self-reflection, I recall Tozer Pak Sheung Chuen's *Waiting for a Friend* (2007–2007) (fig.4), in the same video where he describes his work being like poetry, he explains how waited outside a building at night until the lights went off in each household, only to be left with a single lit window facing him, becoming a mirror to himself outside (1:30-1:59). *a feeling of mine* (2024) shares a similar sense of one on one dialogue; the cedar figure—alone, gazing at the monitor—suggests a longing between self and land.

In retrospect of this exploration, I like to imagine Chuen's experience of waiting outside until met with the final light that wouldnt turn off to be a reflection of my understanding of belonging. Like a window defogging, the clarity of the one on one encounter with the cedar and monitor that emerged made me realize that I was never alone despite the displacement I felt.

Sen7íkw (ripple of water)



Figure 13. *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024) Naomi Watkins.

As much as a chunk of cedar might embody a yearning to belong... it also stands as a personification of artistic longing... That longing may be for a time, future or past, of perceived authenticity... It may also be an expression of that overwhelming artistic longing to transform one's experience of the world into art. (Dion Kliner)

Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me (2024) (fig.13) is a video and cedar installation that explores my evolving relationship with land, memory, and story. The installation consists of a monitor playing a looping video, partially covered by cedar beings that were gathered from the carving of *a feeling of mine* (2024). The video captures the interior of a car, cutting between the backseat's perspective and views from the passenger window. This footage documents a drive—or road trip—to my nation, processing the uncertainty of my spiritual connection to land; wondering whether the land remembers me, or if I remember it. This

uncertainty ultimately leads to a realization: I met my grandmother at Little Shuswap Lake, and despite my doubts, I am reminded that *She* has always been part of me—*Her* stories, everything.



Figure 14. Video still from *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024).

The cedar beings surrounding the monitor serve as a kind of “guard,” embedding the monitor into the material that connects me to my nation. This layering of video and cedar speaks to our shared displacement. We are both from the same nation, yet we exist outside of it, longing for connection. Just as I once longed to become moss or water as a child, *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024) is about realizing that I already am who I sought to be. This revelation is reflected in the evolution of the video’s visual and emotional tone. It begins with a sense of loss and detachment—cold road conditions (fig.14), blue-tinted visuals, and text that reads:

“these trees feel familiar, along with the grass and flowers and other plants around this place. i feel like i know what theyre saying, but maybe not.”



Figure 15. Video still from *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024) Naomi Watkins.

These initial scenes amplify my uncertainty, reinforcing the displacement I feel from my ancestral land. However, as the video progresses, the colors warm (fig.15), reflecting my shift in understanding. The memory of *Her* reaffirms our connection, reminding me that *Her* stories have always been present, even when I was unaware of them. The format of travel ties into my earliest memory of story; the road trip as a child, listening to teachings that I have since forgotten but that remain embedded within me. Many of the shots, particularly those looking toward the passenger seat and window, suggest that I, as the driver, am looking back at where my child self once sat. The video becomes a conversation with my past, a reclamation of stories I once feared lost.

Robin Wall Kimmerer compares teaching with story to a field trip where we wander, explore and engage:

Teaching with story just feels to me like an invitation. Most of our stories don't tell people what to believe, do they? They just say 'hey look at this, this thing happened.' This thing happened and those stories are an invitation to say what do you think about that? How does it engage you? So I love to think about stories as a kind of field trip, where we go wandering together looking at things. And I love doing that. (Online Interview)

This aligns with the structure of *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024). Despite my telling of story appearing as a string of consciousness within the text of the video, I space out each thought to allow it to float freely, even though together, it is a story of my own experiences. The dialogue does not have any oral component and the video's sound consists only of the car's engine humming. Because displacement and reconnection are sensitive topics, I've chosen to use non-spoken text for my own comfort. This choice becomes more pronounced in *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025), where the "voice" conveyed through text expands into its accompanying cedar beings (fig.16), amplifying its resonance in the overall work.



Figure 16. *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025) Naomi Watkins

Long pauses are added between each line to invite viewers to sit with me, observe, and reflect on their own relationships with memory and place. That is why the installation is positioned on the ground, viewers must come close—possibly sitting down—mirroring my own seated posture in the car, inviting them to engage, relate and think about their own stories.

I stopped by to visit Her again, hoping to capture footage of the beach, logs, and mountains—elements of the landscape that had witnessed my first encounter with Her presence. Upon arriving at the shore, I noticed something unusual. The exact spot where I once floated and met Her had small ripples of water, as though someone had dropped a pebble or a fish had surfaced for air, while the rest of the lake remained still. So did I. This was the only place where the water moved. I felt certain I was on the right path. I said hello again, then goodbye, before continuing my journey.



Figure 16. *Longing and Becoming* (2011) Sonny Assu.

The relationship between story, memory, and longing is further reflected in the cedar beings. Their arrangement around the monitor echoes Sonny Assu's *Longing and Becoming* (2017) (fig.16)—a series of discarded wood off-cuts displayed with mask mounts—by similarly portraying an artistic longing through found materials. Assu's work suggests a longing not only for cultural connection but also for transformation. In *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024), the cedar beings evoke a similar desire to connect. In *a feeling of mine* (2024), I carved a figure from cedar—an embodiment of myself—staring at looping scenes of cedar boughs and flowing water. I was trying to become something I already was. Those uncut cedar beings from that carving session were stored away until I saw them again and realized they, too, held presence. They needed no alteration to carry meaning—only acknowledgment.

As Dion Kliner writes on Sonny Assu's *Longing and Becoming* (2017): “as much as a chunk of cedar might embody a yearning to belong... it also stands as a personification of artistic longing.” Here, the cedar beings illustrate that same longing. They remain raw, invoking my own artistic and cultural longing, as well as inherently carrying stories of the land from which it came.



Figure 17. *Passing-Between-Place - from Walking East 002* (2012-ongoing) Jay White.

Jay White's work draws from peripatetic methods of making, especially in his work *Walking East* (2012-ongoing) (fig.17) where he would walk an unconventional route in East Vancouver, always towards the east direction. In *Coyote Walks: A Relational and Narrative Framework for an Emergent Practice* he writes:

Walking, camping, carving and other bodily actions that are used in this practice are understood and experienced through an 'embodied' way of knowing... Embodied cognition is thinking by moving our bodies and using all our senses to discover and interpret the world around us (1)

In traveling to my nation, to *Her*, collecting cedar, carving it, I similarly engage my whole body in the creative process. Although *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024) does not include fresh carvings, the pieces from *a feeling of mine* (2024) bring forward traces of that physical engagement—each gouge representing a moment of contact. Even the simple act of positioning the cedar beings around the monitor extends this embodied connection.

Placing the monitor within these cedar beings became a way of safeguarding my story, allowing the cedar to embrace and hold it. This transformation of self and story rests into a new narrative. The road trip I took as a child first introduced me to story. Now, as I drive to my nation again, I am reclaiming those stories. This journey leads me to a realization: I have always been connected. *Her* stories, my relationship with land, and my understanding of self—despite all those years of not knowing—were already there. I am simply returning to them now.

Setsínem (she sings)

The animacy of the world is something we already know. But, the languages of animacy teeters on extinction, not just for native peoples, but to everyone. Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion—until we teach them not to. We quickly retrain them and make them forget. When we tell them that the tree is not a ‘who’ but an ‘it’ we make that maple an object, we put a barrier between us. We set it outside our circle of ethical concern, of compassion. (Kimmerer 9)

I drove by Her again to pick up wood, sand, and rocks, collecting materials that carried the presence of the water and land there. As I wandered the beach, I heard a humming from the horizon of the water. It was not the droning of the highway or the distant sound of a voice calling across the lake—it was something close, warm, familiar. It sounded like my mother’s voice, low and steady. I didn’t know what to do except continue walking along the shore, but the humming stayed with me. Each time I visit Her, our connection deepens, revealing more and more.



Figure 18. *When we get to the lake, we will rest.* (2025) Naomi Watkins.



Figure 19. *When we get to the lake, we will rest.* (2025) Naomi Watkins.

This presence—the hum, the movement of the water—has guided me toward the creation of *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025). This work expands on the ideas explored in *a feeling of mine* (2024) and *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024), developing a more immersive space where the relationships between land, water, and story are embedded within material, video and sound. The installation (fig.18) consists of a projected video, sound, four cedar beings, and natural elements from *Her*: sand, rocks, moss, sage and cedar boughs (fig.19). These natural elements are arranged intentionally, guiding viewers toward the secluded nook (fig.20) where the projected video plays behind an additional wall that measures 8 feet wide by 6 feet high. This additional wall is not an original part of Emily Carr University's architecture, it is built to enclose the space, guiding viewers to closely walk by the cedar beings—hung on the walls—that hold transducers emitting low, oscillating tones. The projected video is somewhat visible from outside the space, as the rest of the area will have dimmer lighting, inviting viewers into an intimate encounter with the work, with a bench to rest, watch and listen. There are four cedar beings in total, each measuring roughly 2 feet from their longest sides. Three of them are installed on the long side of the wall facing the bench and video, while one is installed on the outward facing side of the additional wall. They are installed at roughly 57 inches from the ground, measuring from their centers. At this height, these cedar beings become more inviting to listen and touch at a general face-level height, as they are still accessible to those who are taller or in a wheelchair. Contrasting the warm tones of the cedar, all but the exterior of the additional wall and the projected area are painted in a light grey-blue. The original walls rise to a 13-foot ceiling, so the light grey-blue only reaches the 8-foot line to align with the height of the additional wall. This creates a more comfortable, enclosed space—similar to when I was submerged under water, ears beneath the surface. The color itself reflects *Her* and the end scene of the video component in *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025), where the car stops, and we gaze at the water through the window. (fig.22)



Figure 20. *When we get to the lake, we will rest.* (2025) Naomi Watkins.



Figure 21. *my love is alive, is alive, is alive* (2022) Dineo Seshee Bopape.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions and can be found [here](#).

This idea of submersion resonates with Dineo Seshee Bopape's *my love is alive, is alive, is alive* (2022) (fig.21), an immersive installation that combines site-specific materials and video. As Bopape addresses African displacement and how memories are carried within land and water, I find a natural resonance with her approach. Bopape applies soil to her walls, grounding

the installation and encircling viewers with rocks to situate them in the space. Aiming for a similar effect in *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025), painting the walls and shaping an intimate nook serves as a contemplative sanctuary.

In *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025), painting acts as a unifying layer for the video and cedar beings, physically connecting all elements through a shared colour. In earlier works, landscape painting alone could not adequately convey animacy, but through this thesis project, I have realized that painting still holds a place in my process—just a different role than I initially envisioned.



Figure 22. *Rock Video Cherry Blossom* (1986) Shigeko Kubota.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions and can be found [here](#).

The auditory experience of the installation is as important as the visual. In *Her Stories Have Always Been a Part of Me* (2024) and *a feeling of mine* (2024), the technological components were visibly collaborating. The old monitors produced a distorted sound, adding to the nostalgia I was initially touching on, but as I shift into *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025) I find that I am focused on the presence of my journey and the cedar beings with their sound that animates the space. In shifting away from old monitors to transducers and projected

video, I find new similarities with Shigeko Kubota's video sculptures (fig.22). Kubota's practice embeds time-based media in physical forms, allowing "moving images [to] become monuments" while "inert objects [become] animated sites of mediation." (Gloria Sutton)

My previous works intertwined cedar with technology, visually merging them. Now, *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025) visibly separates cedar beings from the video projection. The technological aspects still remain, only hidden within the cedar.

Instead of standard speakers within the cedar beings, I am using transducers embedded in the cedar to create low, oscillating tones—subtle from afar, but tangible when viewers place a hand or ear against the cedar beings as these deep tones create vibrations. This approach of sound came from observing how the cedar beings themselves resonated while playing with transducers and also reflecting on indigenous oral teachings, the vibrations of our voice and all sounds around us. At first I thought about using speakers to produce clearer sounds of *Her* but after testing the transducers, they only omitted lower frequencies clearly. Any complex or higher pitched audio became dull and did not reflect the warmth I wanted this installation to resonate. The simple tones that oscillate hold presence in how subtle they are. The vibrations act as an invitation to touch and inquire further than just listening.

My use of transducers is in conversation with Giorgio Magnanensi's practice, where he also embeds transducers in cedar to amplify the wood's inherent voice. Like him, I'm drawn to the way cedar becomes an active collaborator in shaping sound—not just a passive surface that transmits vibrations, but a living, resonant body that has its own way of transforming and translating sound.

Reflecting my belief in the inherent life and energy of more-than-human beings, Henry Graham's notion that an "object" becomes alive through personal encounters resonates further with this decision to use transducers within the cedar beings. These vibrations act as a physical

embodiment of that animacy—amplifying my connection with land and its many voices; meanwhile, the projected video remains mostly quiet in terms of its voice, displaying text rather than audible language. I wish to acknowledge the juxtaposition of how language is used within *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025) through the internal and external states of dialogue in which sound and text are used. The seemingly *internalization* of textual dialogue in the video component, which I deem to be *external* due to the vulnerability of sharing my experiences of displacement and reconnection, collaborates with the externalization of the cedar's voice that reflects my internal dialogue of self and connection to land—more specifically, the relationship made through the cedar beings and *Her*—something that I realize through this thesis project, will never be fully understood through language.

For this reason, language becomes part of this evolving connection. I have been slowly learning my nation's language, Secwepemctsin. While I can only pronounce a few words, I want to incorporate them into this work through the text of the video, as well as this thesis, to practice and grow my vocabulary in hopes to understand my connection to land further. At first, I hesitated to use words I could not fully pronounce, if really at all, reluctant to name my thesis and my work with a language I was still struggling to learn. But Robin Wall Kimmerer's words offered reassurance:

"I remember the words of Bill Tall Bull, a Cheyenne elder. As a young person, I spoke to him with a heavy heart lamenting that I had no native language with which to speak to the plants and the places that I love. 'They love to hear the old language,' he said, 'it's true.' But he said, with fingers on his lips, 'you don't have to speak it here' then patting his chest, 'if you speak it here. They will hear you.'" (9)

This understanding, that the land listens beyond spoken language, resonates with my connection to *Her*. Even if my pronunciation is imperfect, and even if I do not yet have fluency, or perhaps never will, I know *She* hears me. Just as I hear *Her*.

This decision to incorporate Secwepemctsin reflects my own transformation throughout the process of creating *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025) drawing on the fact that I come from a position of trying to reshape my sense of belonging. By embracing this unknowing, I play with my intuition, experiences and materials. Working with carving, video, sound, and installation (all mediums I have never been educated in), I mirror my displacement from my own culture. Returning to this playful state of unknowing, a window opened for me to mend my once displaced, floating spirit with new mediums, artistic process, and language, to create my own sense of belonging.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson speaks to transformation and memory in *Islands of Decolonial Love: Stories & Songs* (21):

*You are the breath over the ice on the lake, you are the one
the grandmothers sing to through the rapids. you are the saved seeds of allies.
you are the saved seeds of allies. you are the space between embraces
shes always going to remember this
You are rebellion, resistance, re-imagination
her body will remember*

This text helps ground *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025) in a framework of transformation, memory, and the deep assurance that *She* remembers. The work is not just about creating an installation, but about speaking through material and place, embedding spirit into the land and water, just as they have always held the stories of those before me. This journey, both artistic and personal, has been for the sake of expressing my connection to land

and water, now knowing, through this thesis project, that I have always been a part of it, and it has always been a part of me.

Ultimately, *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025) stands as both culmination and invitation—an intimate space where land, water, sound, and story meet in an ongoing exchange. Even as I worked toward finishing this installation for the thesis exhibition I recognized that this journey is never truly complete. There will always be more stories to uncover, more words to learn, more trips to swim with *Her*. By sharing the process in this thesis, I hope to acknowledge my growing connection with *Her*, the cedar beings and deeper understanding of displacement and reconnection.

When we get to the lake, we will rest (2025) remains in motion—something to travel with rather than arrive at. This installation offers a living conversation and embrace; one that spans water, memory, and the language of more-than-human beings. As Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds me, if we speak from the heart, the land will hear us—and I, in turn, will remember how to hear *Her*.



Figure 23. Video still from *When we get to the lake, we will rest*. (2025) Naomi Watkins.

Q̓geg (to move or drive slowly)



Figure 24. *When we get to the lake, we will rest.* (2025) Naomi Watkins

Deinstalling *When we get to the lake, we will rest* (2025) felt like draining a pool I had lived inside of for three weeks. Swimming in the ideas of displacement, animacy and reconnection, then to be revisiting my work after many conversations and new perspectives. As each cedar being came off their mounts, the wide blue walls resurfaced, echoing the lake's depth. I felt as though I were back under *Her* water. I noticed smudge-marks where visitors had rested their backs against the wall while they sat, the occasional piece of trash that was left after someone's lunch; those traces confirmed the installation made a space for people to be comfortable. Watching visitors move through the piece was its own revelation: some people only peeked in—wary of crossing an unseen threshold—while others sat for entire loops of video, eyes closed, touching and even hugging the cedar beings. A few never touched the cedar. Knowing people stayed for the ride—each on their own terms—was satisfying and affirmed the

work's invitation to linger and sense. It reminded me that connection is never one-size-fits-all; it's negotiated moment by moment, breath by breath. In hindsight, refusal and the "road trip" were strong methodologies that I used, but did not delve into completely.

I practice a gentle refusal: sharing just enough of my story for connection, but not so much that the mystery—or the safety—evaporates. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls this "coded disruption and affirmative refusal through the use of Indigenous aesthetic practices... How do we speak to each other and build relationships with each other on our own terms?" (199). I give only what feels generative—for me and for viewers—trusting that those attuned to land and displacement will read the gaps.

Some memories of meeting *Her* are too porous for language, so the video offers ellipses: a car window, passing trees, text that is elusive. Viewers may touch the cedar or keep their distance; both choices are valid, but the viewer cannot leave the car with me to enter the water where I met *Her*. This echoes the ethics of cultural knowledge—certain teachings are gifted when trust is earned; others stay with the land. By building a half-hidden nook, I script an encounter like finding a "secret spot." A stairwell behind a mall, a large cardboard box, a small cave in the forest: you can enter, but you bring your own flashlight and decide how deep to wander.

This approach follows Édouard Glissant's idea on opacity. He warns that Western "transparency" reduces others to measurable parts. Glissant's alternative, opacity, names "that which cannot be reduced," (191) the portion of a being that remains self-governed, available only through patience and relationship. That principle guides how I engage cedar, water, and my own history.

Opacity is the ethic behind my gentle refusal. Viewers may sit, listen, touch—or keep their distance. The cedar beings vibrate, but they do not explain themselves; the lake appears only through a windshield, never as a full plunge. Like Glissant, I believe “there are places where my identity is obscure to me,” (192) and that obscurity does not weaken my sense of belonging. It protects it. By accepting what the land chooses to withhold, I practice trust: trust that knowledge can arrive in its own time, trust that intimacy does not require full disclosure.

Transparency would ask me to translate every ripple and cedar hum. Opacity lets the ripple remain partly secret, a signal meant to be felt before it is named. It invites viewers into a slow conversation—one where understanding grows through repeated visits, not through immediate understanding. In that sense, *When we get to the lake, we can rest* (2025) enacts Glissant’s promise of “participation and confluence” (pg.191): sharing space while respecting boundaries, and honouring not-knowing as a kind of care.

Jeneen Frei Njootli’s *wind sucked through bared teeth* (2017) leaves only steel and grease-paint shadows—the objects themselves remain hidden. By withholding them, she resists the museum’s urge to expose everything and reasserts control over who may encounter cultural belongings. I resonate with this mode of refusal, sharing only what feels appropriate and asking viewers to discern the boundary between respectful curiosity and intrusion. After presenting this thesis, I realize refusal is not just a personal instinct but a methodology I want to explore further: carefully withholding and having the confidence that the right people will understand without everything being said.



Figure 25. *When we get to the lake, we will rest.* (2025) Naomi Watkins

While constant motion keeps the body and mind awake—ideas slide in through the cracked window. I like to think that the road trip serves as not only methodology, but fieldwork too. The car becomes both vessel and collaborator: its engine hum sets a baseline drone, its windows frame landscape after landscape. Each gas stop or roadside turnout is a micro-residency where I gather more insight and connection to the land I am driving on. Later, in stillness, those fragments recombine: text appears like the way highway signs flash past; the road shifts from gravel to asphalt. Movement generates details; reflection organizes it. For me a road trip is not just subject matter but a cyclical, peripatetic methodology: each journey departs from the lake and inevitably returns, carrying new memories into the next loop. I plan to keep using this practice—revisiting familiar roads to measure subtle shifts, and venturing into new ones to expand the map of relationships that guide my work.



Figure 26. *When we get to the lake, we will rest.* (2025) Naomi Watkins.

Working with these cedar beings (fig.26) and returning to see *Her* changed my understanding of animacy. Scholarly definitions helped me frame the concept throughout the writing of this thesis, but repeated, tactile encounters taught me that agency lives in relationships. Each visit rewrote the theory I had read into muscle memory: the sting of cold water, the scent that lingers on clothes long after carving. Over time I realized reading about animacy in books or citing theorists doesn't, by itself, make something (or someone) feel alive or relational. Academic frameworks can name or contextualize the idea, but the lived sense of cedar or water having its own presence emerges only through hands-on, repetitive interaction: lifting the cedar, sanding its surface, greeting the water before dipping my hands in. In other words, true recognition of a more-than-human being's agency happens through repeated, embodied encounters rather than through theoretical readings and ideas alone. Animacy, for me, is a mutual energy, signal,

charge, response, spark. Sometimes it flares—like the humming I heard from *Her* horizon or the cloud birds I saw form above me while floating on *Her* surface. Other times it's as steady as a heartbeat: the low frequency vibrating through wood, matching my pulse; the ripple of *Her* water that sat with me during my trip. Working this way and talking more to my peers has also quieted my old worry about expressing myself. I no longer wait for someone else to validate what I'm doing; I just pay attention. If the cedar feels resistant, I back off. If it hums when I touch it, it is okay. That feedback keeps me grounded in what my future will be like in regards to pursuing these themes and relationships further.



Figure 27. *When we get to the lake, we will rest.* (2025) Naomi Watkins.

Stopping on the side of the road, just as the video pauses at the end, contemplating all that has happened and yet to, I feel confident with where my practice has come. I am thankful for all the stops along the way, and getting a last moment to look back at the journey thus far to

see how I have changed as a person and artist. I always felt a bit of doubt in my work, expressing myself; which has hindered the amount of art I could really make. Or the depth I could go with these themes.

I want to continue exploring animacy especially. I want to travel and continue to connect ties of revisiting, reconnecting and being attentive to land as research into what animacy is to me. I want to continue writing and finding more of my own voice in my work, or moreso how to articulate and convey the voice I have within my work and experiences.

With new and growing aspirations, it's time to re-enter the highway with purpose. I will move forward, but not so fast that I lose the dialogue with land. Every future mile will be measured by that commitment: return, listen, and let the more-than-human beings set the speed. Their quiet signals are my compass; their rhythm will chart the rest of the journey.

Kukwstseětsemc, I hope to see you again soon.

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