

This paper is dedicated to my Auntie Doreen Jensen, who passed away in September 2009. Her beautiful gifts and insights as an artist, academic, mother, grandmother, and activist have brought much love and understanding into the world. May we all learn from her generosity and artistry.

(Un)divided

“Stanley Park”

My Auntie Doreen Jensen told me that we have to go into the forest from time to time, to remember that we are interconnected. Why do we need reminding?

One of my earliest memories of Stanley Park is when I was about seven. I was walking in the bush with my cousin and uncle, who were about 11 and 14 at the time. I remember balancing along a huge fallen tree when they took off on me. I ran furiously to catch up, yelling fearfully for them to wait. This was an urban forest; fine with a group, but scary on your own. Sure enough, I ran, movie style, right up against a man dressed in army green. I looked up at his worn whiskered face, and he stood, hands on hips, scolding me: “You should not be in here alone.” Sometime around then my cousin and uncle magically appeared. I was fuming. And shaken.

To me this story speaks volumes about our complicated relationships with the land—as urbanites we experience differing levels of fear and comfort in the forested spaces that are so treasured in Vancouver. What do we really know of these places? Do we belong here? Where did this fear come from? How do we reconnect?

I feel at home in Vancouver’s forests. I was born and raised here—a Metis-Cree girl in Coast Salish land, grateful to live here and raise my children here. Much of my childhood was spent hiking through forests with my parents, swimming in local waters, eating salmonberries and huckleberries and thimbleberries. The forest was never something ‘over there’, but something I felt part of. My cultural teachings likewise blur the lines between Human and Nature. I know that I am part of everything, that we are interconnected—all life past, present, and future. Though it’s challenging to live by these teachings in an imbalanced urban environment that is full of dividing lines, I try. Listening to the land and to Aboriginal stories of the land helps me a great deal.

I have been blessed to hear many Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh stories of Vancouver. I know that Stanley Park is not a park. It is a (much changed) remnant of the land as it was all across what is now called Vancouver—a place layered with stories and ceremony and food gathering sites and villages, stretching back to time out of mind. Few people know this or acknowledge this and as a result, the local indigenous people keep getting written out of the story. What are the consequences of this erasure?

Writing on the land

Some people say that there are no signs on the mountaintops, that it is not written anywhere that this is First Nations land. Anywhere you open the earth there is evidence. It is written in the earth. Debra Sparrow, Musqueam

As we go through this transformative time in Vancouver, and a branding of our city as a sustainable “Green City”, it’s important to go beyond discussing cloth bags and dedicated bike lanes and think deeply about how we relate to the land and to each other. It’s time to be honest about our city’s history—to stop denying Vancouver’s indigenous roots and acknowledge that the indigenous

people are still here, and have been marginalized for long enough.

In all of my work—as a filmmaker, cultural planner and educator—I look at how Vancouver’s story is told, and I am determined to transform persistent colonial erasures. How do we increase the presence of Aboriginal perspectives and aesthetics on the land? How do we build a more inclusive city in which Aboriginal people have a significant role in shaping how we live?

Public art is an effective visible way to rewrite the stories of our city. I am concerned with seeing more Aboriginal images and stories upon the land. In 2003, through Storyscapes¹, I helped create a process for the City of Vancouver to install Coast Salish artworks in the much-visited totem pole site in Stanley Park; which until that point had only representation from other Nations up the Coast. Musqueam artist Susan Point’s striking house post portals now welcome visitors to her people’s traditional territory. The process is slow, but the hope is that soon Aboriginal public art will be a prominent and strong presence throughout all of Vancouver².

In 2007 I had the good fortune of being an Artists Selection Committee member for the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project. Through this project six artists, including two local Aboriginal artists, had the opportunity to express their visions in the Park. How far does this project go in unsettling the imposed narratives and assumptions about Stanley Park’s history, identity, and culture? This essay is my reflection on the project, and Vancouver’s cultural landscapes in general.

Stumps

Perhaps the most powerful form of “environmental art” that I know is the stumps that have surrounded me all my life—large remnants of beautiful trees, hacked up with springboard holes³, and left to slowly decay, reminders of the culture that came here and within a few generations turned this generous land into a paved over, carved up place stripped of much of its diversity of life. It is now a place that reflects western world views of human dominance over nature, survival of the fittest, and the like. What stories do these stumps tell of the settler culture that cleared away the trees, streams, animals, and existing cultural landscapes of the indigenous people? Contemplate those hacked up stumps. Can you hear a different narrative of gentleness, balance and renewal? Imagine it taking hold (again).

Indigenous art

I can argue that we are rock. We always have been. Composed of earth and minerals, the Creator made us out of stone and dirt. Wil George, Tsleil-Waututh

In the western art world, the practice of “environmental art” is relatively new. It comes from a culture that sees itself as separate from nature. Many artists are working to create terms and processes to heal and reconfigure their relationships with the land. These days it’s remarkable for people to make art on the land, tracing not too obtrusive marks onto soil, trees, water. But really, working with the land and its many rich materials is nothing new at all. Traditionally, that’s what Aboriginal people across this land have always done, respectfully marking the land with our gratitude, aesthetics, science, belief systems, and celebrating our relationships with animals, plants, insects, water, planets. Likewise, the land made its mark on us. We as Aboriginal people don’t have

¹ Storyscapes is a multimedia community arts project I launched in 2003, that gathers and shares Aboriginal stories of Vancouver through video, exhibitions, public art and other creative forms.

² Which means more than installing artworks on 2010 Olympic venues.

³ Springboards were the long planks inserted into cut notches in the wood, which the loggers would stand on as they sawed away at the giant trees.

to call it environmental art because it's just part of our everyday cultural expressions that affirm the straightforward fact of life that we have always known—we are of the earth.

I believe that even when an Aboriginal artist is working in the studio, creating a multimedia piece, or writing a screenplay, they are in fact practicing 'environmental art', because most Aboriginal people share a worldview of interconnection with the land and all life. This connection is what so many people in western society seem to be seeking—a greater sense of place within the natural world, and a more balanced way of living. The hope of this Stanley Park Environmental Art Project and other land-based initiatives is that they can help all of us reconnect with the land and with each other—restoring our blood-and-bone knowledge that we are completely intertwined.

Parks

In western culture, humans are separate from nature. In fact, humans are seen, in various gradations (gender, ethnicity, class, age), to be above nature. Nature is objectified, dissected from its wild whole—an embracing blanket for all life—and cut up into a patchwork of private and public property parcels. Within this society, parks are human made constructions, set aside pieces of land where we go to 'enjoy nature'. Stanley Park is a contained, in-roaded, managed island of green whose original cultural landscapes have been replaced with new names and new caretakers.⁴ We are grateful of course to have these places. Can we imagine and rebuild human environments that allow diversity of life to live and thrive without our constant intervention? Can we see ourselves once again as relatives to the trees, animals, rocks?

Stanley Park Environmental Art Project

The Stanley Park Environmental Art Project, inspired by the fallen trees in the 2006 wind storm, is an interesting way to get us thinking about the taken-for-granted land. Six artists—including two artist teams—were selected to create artworks on the land, with the land, using materials that will eventually find their way back into the land. Happened upon in quiet walks through cedar and salmonberry or found through self-guided tours, the artworks express site-specific conversations with the park.

While we are enjoying these unique and beautiful artworks amongst the trees, it's important to ask who gets to write their ideas, dreams, fears, stories onto the land, who gets to 'respond' to places. Who is absent? Local indigenous people, who for millennia marked their land freely according to their own relationships and pathways, no longer have the right to interact with their land as they used to—and can in fact be penalized for hunting, gathering, culturally modifying, and harvesting without 'permission'. The ability to practice traditional ceremonies has also been curtailed as so many of the forested and waterfront spaces are now public parks.

And let's also ask who is positioned to shape the parameters, to approve the ideas, to be the final voice of authority in defining this place and what it means to Vancouver? Most often, it is dominant culture's definitions and narratives that we see. What are we missing, in this ongoing absence of indigenous voices? As we work to 'revision' Vancouver and to heal an environment that has been degraded for 150 years, it makes sense to listen to the people who lived sustainably here for thousands of years, who have invaluable knowledge and perspectives.

Fortunately, the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project did have two Aboriginal artists, one of

⁴ While Park Board has the mandate—through contracts with the federal government—to manage Stanley Park, the land is unceded territory with no signed treaty handing that authority over to the City. There are land claims registered for Stanley Park that will hopefully one day resolve and clarify these jurisdictions.

whom is from this region. Squamish Nation artist T'Uy'Tanat Cease Wyss and Secwempc artist Tania Willard brought thoughtful perspectives into the contested space of Stanley Park. Both T'Uy'Tanat and Willard are community activist artists who work with story and memory, merging their cultural teachings with urban multimedia sensibilities, reminding us to think about where we stand, and to pay attention to the stories that lie buried, or uprooted, in the world around us.

Four winds

Many people, including some of the artist applicants to this project, were heartbroken over the “tragic” loss of trees in Stanley Park. The winds that felled so many cedar and douglas fir did what the four winds have always done—shape and transform the land. When you reduce the forest cover to small pockets, when you fetishize these ‘nature places’, the loss of trees feels that much greater. But when you live in connection with nature, when you have trees all around you, you know this is part of the creative destruction cycle of life. You value what is upturned. Wind brings opportunities for transformation and renewal, new ways of seeing. Wind can also keep us upright.

Selection

While Aboriginal participation was highlighted in the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project Call to Artists, there were only a few Aboriginal artists who applied for this project—which raises all kinds of questions about how projects are shaped, how artist calls are designed and disseminated, and how systemic barriers are/are not being addressed.

T'Uy'Tanay Cease Wyss from the Squamish Nation partnered with local Italian heritage artist Davide Pan to propose artworks that remind people of the indigenous history of Stanley Park through the “language of plants” as T'Uy'Tanat calls it. Secwempc artist Tania Willard proposed bringing the sounds of a decaying log alive for visitors to hear—calling attention to the often overlooked minutia and complexity of the web of life. Another Aboriginal applicant wanted to create playful performance pieces and video interventions that called into question western constructions of nature.

It is important to note that while identified as a priority, Aboriginal representation was not written into the project. In the selection of T'Uy'Tanat and Tania Willard, there was a fair amount of discussion, and at points, there was a need to remind people that Aboriginal representation is essential, and that these two artists carry cultural knowledge and artistic talent that should be included. While everyone appreciated their proposals and ideas, these Aboriginal artists could have been displaced by more ‘established’ artists from settler and/or immigrant communities, who work in the area of “environmental art”. Thankfully, the committee concluded that the inclusion of these Aboriginal voices and perspectives was a priority. But, as far as I am concerned, it was too close for comfort. Had other people not agreed, or not appreciated the artists’ work, there might not have been any Aboriginal representation at all. I hope the Parks Board staff and other City staff continue to build relationships with Aboriginal communities to understand ways of shaping consultation and building greater inclusion.⁵

⁵ There are many innovative ways that planners and others can work to build Aboriginal participation into all of this work that involves the land and our city’s story—from Aboriginal-specific artist calls, to active communications and outreach, to creating policy aimed at increasing Aboriginal representation in cultural affairs and public art. They need to have an active voice and a presence, not only from the happenstance that one of their artists saw the artist call, applied to the artist call, and was selected by the jury.

T'Uy'Tanat Cease Wyss

T'Uy'Tanat, from the Squamish Nation, was born in the village of Eslha7an in North Vancouver. She has learned from many traditional plant teachers about medicines and other important uses for plants. While very much an urbanite, T'Uy'Tanat continues to gather plants as her ancestors did, from the forests of the North Shore and beyond, she knows many songs and stories that can enrich our understandings of this region. With much of her focus on food security and keeping traditional knowledge alive, T'Uy'Tanat brought grounded insights and hopeful visions of abundance and healing to the project.

T'Uy'Tanat partnered with Vancouver-based sculptor Davide Pan, to write culture and different ways of seeing onto a patch of forest behind the totem pole site. In their piece *Xapayay'/Cedar*, T'Uy'Tanat's words for plants, elements, meanings were etched into wood (what she calls "wood grafitti"). Blown down trees and stumps were turned into planters and bowls to speed up the natural regeneration of the forest—honouring the never ending cycles of renewal and production. The carving of a stump to read "CMT" is a reference to the nearby cedar whose bark has been gathered in select strips—what archaeologists like to call a "culturally modified tree". The artists have made subtle yet intriguing changes to the land to allow for more life to grow, and, hopefully, for more understanding to grow.

T'Uy'Tanat's sharing of language and traditional plant knowledge reminds us that there is something much older here. There are relationships with this land, shaped by thousands of years of cultural life that go much deeper than the roads and signs and other 'modern interventions'. While there is no denying that Stanley Park is a contested space, and while it can be argued that the absence of Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh voices in this project is a concern, *Xapayay'/Cedar* respectfully challenges the narratives that have been imposed onto Stanley Park, and encourages an opening up of the stories, images, representations and jurisdictions of this valued park.



details from *K'Ayacht'n! (We Hold Our Hands Up To You!)* by Davide Pan and T'Uy'Tanat Cease Wyss
Photos by Paul Colangelo

Tania Willard

Tania Willard of the Secwempc Nation was born in Kamloops, and has made Vancouver her home for the past 10 years. She works with narrative in diverse media—graphic design, woodcutting, video, comics, etc.—to address the many layers and intersections of culture, colonialism, land, memory. Her first work as part of this project was the ‘ephemeral’ piece *Birth*, which speaks to her own recent transformation to motherhood. Her careful peeling of bark from an interwoven lattice of roots highlights the renewal that comes with upheaval and change. Upturned trees—what naturalists call root balls—reveal many stories. Paths traveled, black remains of long ago fires, the intricate mix of clay, sand, rocks and soil that are layered under our footsteps everywhere we step. All part of the story, all interconnected—whether visible or not.

Her semi-permanent piece, *Entwined*, is an interwoven braid of natural materials that honour so many aspects of Coast Salish land and life. To me, the weaving of naturally dyed (using tree barks) wool with bark from the sacred cedar, speaks of cedar bark mats, and of mountain goat wool blankets that women have woven here for millennia. Blankets of geometric designs that tell ancient stories of the mountains and other ancestors. Wrapped around people to honour, celebrate, comfort. The oyster shells sewn on to the red wool recall the abundant food and materials found here, as well as the midden in Stanley Park that was unceremoniously dug up (ancestors and all) to pave the roads into the park. Her piece is striking and beautiful, while remaining organic and respectful of the land that gifts such treasures and nurtures all of us.

Perhaps looking up at the newly adorned cedar people will be humbled, and feel a peaceful sense of their place within the beautiful whole. Perhaps they will be reminded that we need every part of the web—from star to eagle nest to root to oyster bed.



Entwined by Tania Willard
Photos by Paul Colangelo

Listen and Cozy

The focus of my discussion has been the Aboriginal artists within this Project, and how their expressions can contribute to a rewriting of the dominant narratives and understandings of Stanley Park, and Vancouver's colonial mythologies more generally. The other artists have also created beautiful pieces that offer the possibility of shifting our view of the land around us. Peter von Tiesenhausen and John Hemsworth created a round cedar piece entitled *Listen*. They describe in their statement that it's about listening to the land, which is extremely important as our society strives to treat the living world much better than it has been treated for the past 150 years. This listening, this paying closer attention must include listening to the ancestors and their descendents, who have so much to share and who deserve to write their stories onto the land as they always have.

I also like that Shirley Wiebe, with her semi-permanent piece *Cozy*, has wrapped a tree stump in a blanket—made of tree cookies that many diverse residents inscribed with their narratives. Her piece speaks to me of nurturing and protection, as the land feeds and protects us, so should we also take care of the land, and all life. While seeing her piece, I found myself asking, 'Where are the Coast Salish blankets?' It would be so healing to have these local blankets prominent throughout the city, a well-known symbol of the strong generous women who have nurtured life here for thousands of years. With the work of people like Musqueam weaver Debra Sparrow, this may one day become reality, and the idea of embracing and nurturing can become the new vision that guides how we live here.



Listen by John Hemsworth and Peter von Tiesenhausen
Photos by Paul Colangelo



Cozy by Shirley Wiebe

Remember

The moon, who is one of us, steps out of the sky to keep you company. She walks with you and whispers in your ear. Marguerite Houle, Huron

As we try to reconfigure our relationship with the land, and stop taking our air water and land for granted, indigenous stories and perspectives are needed. I look forward to the day when local elders, not just Stanley Park Ecology Society ecologists, have the chance to take people on a tour of the park to share the significance of places and the teachings of good life.

These artworks created during the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project offer an opportunity to remember, to reflect and to listen. There is something much deeper resonating in this land—songs and stories and dreams of the indigenous people who have given up so much so that so many others can enjoy the great lifestyle that Vancouver is famous for. So that we can all breath that sea air and look up at the cedar that keeps us dry, and be nourished by the many good foods that grow here.

I believe that the work and messages of T'Uy'Tanat and Tania Willard peacefully placed in Stanley Park are like a gesture of raised hands to the land, and to the people of this land, for being so patient and generous. A whispered thank you, a blanket of remembering wrapped around us. Hopefully, more and more of us venture into the forest, to remember that we are interconnected, to remember that there are stories and teachings here that offer a key to understanding, that can help us build the sustainability we so badly want, and need. May this work of reconnecting and undividing continue, and may it be indigenous people leading the way. All my relations.

Kamala Todd
Metis-Cree