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Immersive storytelling and affective ethnography in virtual reality

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ABSTRACT

Virtual reality (VR) storytelling, particularly in its nonfictional modes, promises a sensory immersion among others whose lives and ways of being a privileged viewer might not otherwise experience. In this essay, by focusing on the Emmy-nominated 2018 VR film *Traveling While Black*, we explore how the immersive power of VR storytelling can enact ethnographic encounters premised less on the impulse to extract meaning from other people and their ways of life than on the sensory and affective force of being with others in an unfolding experience of both similitude and difference. Without wishing to overstate VR's empathy-inducing potential, we suggest that by situating viewers at a paradoxical threshold between proximity and distance, the affective power of VR derives in part from a narrative form capable of fostering nonappropriative relations.

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The privileges of virtual reality

Still relatively new in a commercial sense, the high cost and low accessibility of Virtual reality (VR) make it a technology that remains mostly for the privileged. As privilege begets more privilege, one of the great benefits of VR as a storytelling medium is its ability to create access to scenes of encounter and experience to which viewers might not otherwise be privy. With trends pointing toward VR becoming more commonplace and democratized in the years ahead, our interest here is to explore some ways that VR as a medium can leverage the political power of immersive storytelling to evoke with affective force the privilege of certain bodies over others. Nonfiction VR in particular, we argue, often through its sensual use of voices, stories, histories, documentary research, and, most importantly, the body, can perform “evocative ethnographies.”¹ The show-don't-tell spirit that drives more evocative forms of ethnography, which nonfiction VR may offer, enables nonappropriative relations with other lives and ways of being.

Many broadly “ethnographic” modes of production manage perfectly well to be non-appropriative, certainly in intention. Conversely, the representational vividness of evocative ethnography does not alone inoculate it from exoticizing or othering its subjects.

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What we argue makes nonfiction VR so promising as a method of documenting the inevitably incomplete experience of exposure to others, however, is its ability to simulate—not just represent—the manifesting simultaneity of difference and sameness that happens during the embodied presence of an encounter with an other. Sometimes the power of simulated VR experiences derives from the felt intensity of being made present to unspeakable and ineffable things. Other times, it is a matter of locating the viewer within a world that is not otherwise accessible to them, whether because it is non-local, imaginary, forbidden, or because it involves people whose different identities and communities—and hence whose stories, histories, and ways of being—are ordinarily beyond the purview of a viewer’s personal experience. Whatever the case, there is a lot on the line: without critically exploring new ways to improve and share in sense-making about otherness, the narrative work of describing the other, however deftly executed or well-intentioned, risks discounting the other’s ultimate unfinalizability.

In this essay, we explore this mode of simulation through analysis of the Emmy-nominated 2018 VR film (though technically a 360-degree video) *Traveling While Black (TWB)*.² By focusing on *TWB*, we aim to consider, as two white writers, how the immersive power of VR storytelling can enact “ethnographies of encounter” premised less on the impulse to extract *meaning* from other people and ways of life than on the sensory and affective force of being with others in an unfolding experience of both similitude and difference. Ethnographies of encounter, as Lieba Faier and Lisa Rofel have noted, are depictions of “engagements across difference” that “retain a commitment to demonstrating how unequal cultural histories and forms of difference have material and political effects.”³ Faier and Rofel are thinking principally about written ethnographies in the field of cultural anthropology—not about VR—but there is no reason the impulse to decolonize engagements across difference cannot be carried out in other media forms. Without wishing to overstate VR’s supposed power as an “empathy machine,” then, as many enthusiasts of the technology have done,⁴ we look closer at *TWB* because it demonstrates what John L. Jackson Jr. champions—*pace* Clifford Geertz’s famous phrase—as the *thin description* of ethnography: the surface of the life of others and the stories they want to tell us, without merging their bodies and stories with ours or deigning to decipher the meaning of it all by describing racial discrimination.⁵

Immersion and presence

“Immersion” has been the go-to word to describe VR for some time. Often understood as an erasure of the medium, the immersion of the viewer in VR happens through creating a sense of presence: one’s total physical immersion into a virtual world. Paradoxically, this immersion is achieved in part through the disappearance of the viewer’s body. At the level of both production and experience, VR in fact often plays in-between visibility and invisibility. When Janet Murray writes about media immersion, for instance, she stresses that immersion is about “the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality ... that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus,” such that participation in this new reality involves learning “to do the things that the new environment makes possible.”⁶ Tacitly echoing Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s rhetorical sense of presence as a matter of bringing certain elements to the perceptual center of an audience’s attention “in order that they may occupy the

foreground of the hearer's consciousness,"⁷ Murray suggests that the paradoxical nature of *all* narrative lies in making present a virtual world that appears at once "real" and "not there."⁸

As a technology, VR attempts to turn itself into an invisible medium to produce the total immersion of the viewer. It performs a kind of kidnapping of the viewer in a way that cinema cannot, whereby the only opportunity to "get out of the story" is to remove the headset and end the experience altogether. When wearing a VR headset, for example, it is important that no light gets in from an "outside" or peripheral field of vision, because that punctures the veil of total immersion that the technology, in its ideal form, strives to achieve. By taking viewers into a computer-generated place, VR promises to become what Murray predicted: a medium that "melts away into transparency."⁹ The erasure of the screen achieved by the VR headset precisely by erasing what is *not* screened exemplifies the threshold paradox of VR as a storytelling medium that might facilitate ethnographic exposure to the other: how to be both inside and outside a story at the same time?

To be sure, nonfiction VR is still looking for its own grammar and conventions to manage the paradoxical relation between on- and off-screen.¹⁰ Despite removing the cinematic frame, the "immersive" potential of VR technology creates an ambiguous relation between the two, between the fictional world and the viewer's imaginary. As Catherine Fowler has observed of gallery films, once the frame loses its cinematic delineation, the off-screen accrues radical possibilities as "an imaginary space beyond the fictional world."¹¹ VR especially relies on the suggestion, as Fowler puts it (in the case of gallery films), that "the image continues through off-frame and off-screen space."¹² By contrast, theatre and fictional films have long been dependent on the opposite convention: namely, establishing a clear-cut "off-screen" that remains outside of the fictional world, thereby creating a distance between the virtual world and the audience—a construct often referred to as "the fourth wall." While Murray writes that the screen and the mouse in computer games play the role of a reassuring fourth wall, ensuring that our participation in the game is structured as a "visit" without consequence in the real world,¹³ VR aims to remove this fourth wall altogether by simulating reality rather than representing it. While the viewer's head-turning freedom annihilates the cinematic off-frame within VR, the off-screen remains imaginary and beyond the "visit"—beyond what the viewer sees—while becoming, it could be argued, an integral part of VR works.

As a self-proclaimed "VR experience," *TWB* brings the audience into Ben's Chili Bowl, an actually existing diner in Washington, DC, that has been a haven of peace for the Black community since 1958. As *TWB* relates, Ben's Chili Bowl was listed in the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, which Victor Hugo Green and his family published from 1936 to 1966 as a kind of parallel resource for Black people in Jim Crow America, providing a list of places they could eat, buy gas, or safely stay while traveling by road. Becoming the material incarnation of racial segregation and the perennial need for safe places for African Americans and other people of color in the region, Ben's Chili Bowl becomes a materially embodied metonym for the historical travails and dangers that people of color in the United States have faced since before the advent of the interstate system in the 1950s and into our ongoing time of racially directed police violence. In *TWB*, Black women and men alternate as storytellers who recount how Black people in the United States have been denied freedom and agency, to which white people (especially white

middle-class males) have always been able to aspire (if not achieve). For the characters appearing in the story, Ben's Chili Bowl was, and to a certain extent remains, the idealized promise of a safe haven for Black travelers.

As audience members travel from a theatre hall to the streets and *into* the diegetic space of the diner, viewers also move from the 1950s African American reality of segregation and violence to one of today's prominent social movements, Black Lives Matter. The framed broadcasting of a black-and-white film and the seats of the theatre hall fade out to an in-color present-day setting in which the viewer is seated at a bar, listening to the real story of Sandra Butler-Truesdale, presented as a "fifth generation Washingtonian." Until the end, the immersive video continues blending framed projected extracts of archival films with virtualized places and people. This audiovisual merging emphasizes the film's own mediation of reality, rather than pretending to be the viewer's complete immersion in one. By way of brief comparison, consider the 2015 VR film *Clouds over Sidra*, which covers the Syrian refugee crisis and thus similarly documents a community subject to oppression and restricted mobility.¹⁴ In *Clouds over Sidra*, however, the audience is situated among a group of people portrayed as the others, "the ones to be observed," rather than as listeners, "others like us." By choosing not just to show but also to tell, *TWB* avoids positioning viewers as anthropological voyeurs; it creates the "proper distance" between nearness and separation needed to give viewers an ethical position embodied as themselves, without the condescension of taking the other's place.

One way *TWB* preserves a proper distance is by reintroducing cinematic frames through a darkened *mise-en-scène*, which evokes the history of long-lasting racism and systemic violence against Black people in the United States (see [Figure 1](#)). The black-and-white footage within these frames documents another time and place that is nevertheless eerily familiar today. Particularly by superimposing the physical parameters of the fictional space—its walls, doors, ceiling, etc.—over the parts of bodies coming and going from these more historical frames, the film visually establishes a continuity between the racism of the past and that of the present. Just as Fowler observed of frames and the white



Figure 1. Frames-within-frames in *Traveling While Black*. Authors' screenshot.

cube of gallery films, the merging of the edges of *TWB*'s diner space with the cinematic frames acts as "a reminder of something that we cannot see, [and] draws attention to the incompleteness of what we are seeing."¹⁵ One of the apparent impetuses for *TWB* is to address the invisibility and sparse documentation of the systemic violence against Black people—off the frame of our racist collective consciousness.¹⁶ The viewer's "visits" to the past within *TWB* affect the viewer's imaginary, as they disturb (through the addition of cinematic frames) the delineation of the screen, of what is shown and said, and what remains beyond the fictional world. The emphasis placed on the framing of these past images also offers a continuity between the reality of the VR piece and what is altogether off-screen. This activates the potential of the imaginary through the multiplicity of connections with the viewer's material reality, or indeed through their simultaneous "immersion" and aesthetic distance.

Classical Hollywood cinema also strives to immerse its viewers, thanks largely to its well-thought grammar, its big screen, and the darkness of a movie theatre, which altogether gain the spectator's willing suspension of disbelief. But the immersive qualities of VR, which achieve a more total sensory ambience, run the risk of creating what Kate Nash calls an "'improper distance' in which the other becomes 'indistinguishable from ourselves.'"¹⁷ For Nash, a "proper distance calls for a combination of proximity and distance"¹⁸ so as to position the audience in a world that is "common and shared"¹⁹ with the storied characters by foregrounding the latter's emotional experiences and structural inequalities, yet without conflating the audience's own identificatory experience with the "others" in the story. In nonfiction VR, improper distance arises from the merging of the viewer's body into an other's (virtual) body, or from the empathetic communication of individual feelings in an exoticized virtual place. The improper distance of the audience in nonfiction VR accordingly often results in a failure to contextualize the virtual space in an existing political and historical reality.

TWB exemplifies one way that VR can do powerful, affectively charged ethnographic work by offering both a proximity and a proper distance between the viewer and those encountered in its narrative. As we will observe later in this essay, the viewer remains strikingly disembodied in *TWB*, and is not offered any possibility to act within the fictional world. The viewer's disembodiment in 360-degree videos and the fluidity of the frame that VR headsets offer—situating the viewer within the fictional location and among its characters—place emphasis on the constant back-and-forth relation between on-screen and off-screen, the multiple relations between the fictional world and the viewer's imaginary linked to a material reality. The film's oral, nearly testimonial form of storytelling, and its localized visual scenography together serve to expose and challenge racialization and structural inequalities without conflating the viewer and the viewed. In doing so, *TWB* produces what one of us has elsewhere called an "affirmative aesthetics."²⁰ By conflating the past and the present in a critique of the status quo, *TWB* suggests future alternatives while avoiding falling into the negativity of lamentation and insistence on trauma, meaning, and significance. Another way to put this is to suggest that, by rhetorically situating the audience in a shared sensory world among the characters and their common history of exclusions, *TWB* creates what Kenneth Burke might call "consubstantiality": in this case, a way of positioning the audience and characters as "both joined and separate,"²¹ hence straddling the threshold of proximity and distance that often challenges audiovisual arts.

Nonfiction VR such as *TWB*, we could say, locates viewers in-between presence and absence. Being both embodied and disembodied, we become witnesses without becoming *voyeurs*. On the one hand, we exist on the same plane as the other characters. We are given a concrete place in the virtual world: characters look at us, we are given a seat (e.g., where the camera was placed to film the 360-degree video), and objects indicate our presence (e.g., via a virtual mug with hot coffee placed in front of us). On the other hand, we cannot act in the virtual world: we are left without a body, voice, or physical appearance. *TWB* does not strive to induce empathy through a first-person narrative or the merging of bodies (something a range of neuroscientists and psychologists have promoted).²² Insofar as *TWB* situates viewers *with* the other, and neither *against* them nor looking *at* or *through* them (see [Figure 2](#)), we find that its evocative force is best explained as an affective phenomenon.



Figure 2. The audience is part of the listening audience in *Traveling While Black*. Image retrieved from [oculus.com](#).

Theories of affect widely acknowledge the social contagiousness of moods and dispositions that orient people to one another beyond language or rational action.²³ As many who study ethnography are beginning likewise to recognize, the sensed and felt intensities of embodied and emplaced encounters with the other (including the other-than-human) are not ancillary to making sense of such encounters; they are of its essence.²⁴ Accordingly, more evocative and affective ethnographic practices are beginning to emerge that seek to avoid, as Ian Skoggard and Alisse Waterston put it, “the danger in trying to grasp intellectually what is fundamentally felt and sensed.”²⁵ When it exemplifies the ineffable and affective force in this sort of evocative ethnography, nonfiction VR, such as *TWB*, can become far richer than mere entertainment, journalism, or traditional documentary.

Ethnography beyond documentary

What we are suggesting, if only in speculative form, is that in VR works such as *TWB*, the viewer’s position between proximity and distance—the “proper” position for documentary witnessing—also resembles the “proper” position of an ethnographer. At base,

ethnography is the work of *writing about people*, and it has lately become a key concept in communication studies as scholars look for ways to make sense of human alterity in its many racial, cultural, gendered, and other identarian forms. In step with the affective turn, autoethnography in particular—at least the variety in which researchers act as “participant observers” by situating themselves subjectively among others and writing about that experience without the conceit of removing themselves from the subsequent accounting—has, across the humanities and social sciences, emerged as a valued means of researched sense-making. Yet, as Tim Ingold has argued in the context of anthropology (though not, we think, without implications for other fields), the term “ethnography” has become so modish and promiscuously used lately that its meaning and value have suffered.

For Ingold, ethnography sometimes becomes the loose notion of making sense, *after the fact*, of encounters with others. Ethnography’s “ulterior purpose,” he observes ruefully, “is documentary.”²⁶ In other words, what “ethnographicness” now tends to involve is an encounter with others that has become secondary to its aftermath: specifically, to the scholarly work of assessing the encounter by reviewing notes and documenting it in writing. “In effect,” Ingold regrets, “to cast encounters as ethnographic is to consign the incipient—the about-to-happen in unfolding relationships—to the temporal past of the already over.”²⁷ One danger of doing so lies in imagining people, as well as the temporal and spatial contexts of encounters with them, as fixed and unchanging, to see an instance as indicative of a permanence, a part as a microcosm of a whole. From Ingold’s standpoint, the still greater failure is epistemological. By conflating ethnography and documentary, such that an actual encounter with others is taken to be in service of the post-facto assessment of that encounter, the dynamic and participatory immersion among others gets lost as it is documented into something ostensibly complete and fixed, no matter how representationally detailed or “thick” the description of its elements may be. As Ingold puts it, “The ethnographer writes up; the anthropologist—a correspondent observer at large—does his or her thinking in the world.”²⁸

The intricate relations between on- and off-screen in VR challenge the notion of what “thinking in the world” as a “correspondent observer” involves. Not only those trained in anthropology, after all, are correspondent observers of and with what is around them. And one way or another, all thinking and experience happen *in* the world, in a sensorial place. If the immersive totality of VR can give the impression of its virtual world supplanting the actual, then VR in fact plays with this threshold, leaving viewers in multiple worlds at once. While donning a VR headset to “enter” a virtual world and removing it to “return” to the familiar and material world mark clear indications of an experience’s beginning and end, the world was never left behind. How could it be? To inhabit any world is to move our material bodies within it, to be placed among so many other bodies and so much other matter that, as Jeff Malpas puts it, “this ‘being placed’ is identical with our existence.”²⁹

In other words, despite the powerful illusion that VR carries off, and which ethnographic write-ups can instantiate, there is no figure of thought *outside* a world, no “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere,” to borrow Donna Haraway’s felicitous phrasing.³⁰ And this is precisely Ingold’s concern: he wants us to avoid the arrogance and supposed objectivity of imagining knowledge could ever be situated outside of practice, outside of experience, beyond the becoming of knowledge through the perceptual

apprehension of something always already happening before us, right now, whether virtual, actual, or both. Another way to put this is to note that all observation is participant observation, and that all participation involves observing. Yet, few methods or mediums of storytelling perform this reciprocity as poignantly as VR because of its ability to operate at the threshold whereby the distinction between participation and observation feels inadequate, whereby the very notion of “participant observation” seems redundant.

Elsewhere, one of us has written about the fundamental incompatibility between, on the one hand, being truly present to a vibrant world, and on the other, the inclination to extract meaning from that world and then to communicate it.³¹ Because “presence,” as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca long ago observed, “acts directly on our sensibility,”³² it happens at a register of experience that is still in process, before it has been articulated through reason into language. To achieve presence is to be so sensually immersed in the immediacy of an encounter as to render any documentary impulse while present to it an interruption. To write about it, to photograph it, to record it, would involve a disruption in the immersive power of the sensible. This disruption is something VR strives to foreclose, but not without leaving the viewer a sense of agency within the experience, which stems from the power of the imaginary.

In the same way an ethnographer is always embodied, the user of VR is not and cannot be disembodied, as N. Katherine Hayles has stressed, because the body is needed in order to “see, hear, feel, and interact within virtual worlds.”³³ Indeed, as Hayles observes, in VR simulation “one is both present and not present” insofar as being embodied in a virtual world tends to leave viewers invisible to their own eyes.³⁴ In the case of 360-degree videos, viewers tend to remain “passive” and silent in the same ways as cinematic spectators.³⁵ But passivity is a cruel fallacy. By implying a dialectical alternative to activity, “passivity” suggests that the only valid forms of action are those visible and otherwise perceivable to others. In such a formulation, unconscious, disembodied, distant, imperceptible, and latent modes of acting, or maybe just preparing to act, are dismissed as inessential. Merely to be in a world is to be active within it, if only by processing the structure of exposure one finds oneself within. But when this processing serves the end of describing, depicting, “linguaging,” or otherwise representing that exposure in a documented form, what is involved is not the self-sufficiency of participation alone, but rather an ethnographic approach that risks foreclosing the unfinalizability of that which it seeks to describe.

The dangers of such an approach may not be that great in fictional VR, or even in some benign cases of documentary VR; but when nonfiction VR endeavors to tell or document the stories of historically oppressed groups, the stakes are higher. In the case of Blackness, for instance—and for African American identities in particular—generations of living “in the wake” of chattel slavery have made racism atmospheric. To attempt to capture the ongoing repercussions of that wake ethnographically, as if somehow coming from outside it, is to risk treating it as less all-encompassing than it is. As Christina Sharpe notes in *In the Wake*, what is at stake is both “not recognizing antiblackness as total climate” and not noticing the insistent Black resistance to the “imposition of non/being” that such a climate creates.³⁶ For Sharpe, then, the work of Black artists, poets, writers, and musicians may “take up the wake as a way toward understanding how slavery’s continued unfolding is constitutive of the contemporary conditions.”³⁷

TWB performs what Sharpe would identify as the “wake work” of bringing to light those legacies of slavery that continue to deny Black life.³⁸ The framed black-and-white films in *TWB* act as a wake, a recognition of living in the afterlife of slavery, including its consequences of ongoing and policy-driven anti-Blackness. As Sharpe writes, “the wake require[s] new modes of writing, new modes of making-sensible.”³⁹ Nonfiction VR, though not intrinsically capable of offering such new modes, *can* do so through affective ethnographic forms, of which *TWB* is exemplary. Through the affective ethnographic experience of *TWB*, the viewer is reminded of their position as “correspondent observer,” at once witness, participant, and writer of the everyday and future of Black existence.

The freedom from, or the freedom to, travel while Black

Though *TWB* documents a particular and actual history of Black mobility and freedom in America, it can also be read as a rumination on VR’s offering of an ethnographic position: a display of the ways that privilege sometimes hinges on the difference between a “freedom from” and a “freedom to.” As depicted in the film, the basis of this privilege is racial, but it could just as well be gender, sexuality, or many other factors. As Elizabeth Grosz has wondered, for instance, “Is feminist theory best served through its traditional focus on women’s attainment of a freedom from patriarchal, racist, colonialist, and heteronormative constraint? Or by exploring what the female—or feminist—subject is and is capable of making and doing?”⁴⁰ For Grosz, the latter question is the more provocative, particularly insofar as it leads to “exploring the subject’s freedom through its immersion in materiality.”⁴¹ In *TWB*, the narrative underscores that, for some bodies, a *freedom to* travel does not mean a *freedom from* prejudice, imperilment, and fear. Meanwhile, for the viewer, immersed in the experience through the VR headset, their own body is strikingly disembodied and devoiced, which leaves their perceivable racial identifications ambiguous in the reality of the film. The viewer too is suspended at a threshold where the *freedom to* look around the diner where most of the experience occurs does not come with a corresponding *freedom from* being restricted there and unable to interact or move freely among others. If the white viewer is *free from* the negative experience of traveling while being Black in the United States, and generally *free to* travel at ease in the material world, then the anti-Blackness of the United States translates within the VR piece as the impossibility for the viewer to move at all.

Sometimes the paralysis of being caught between these different types of freedom manifests in experience as a feeling of hopelessness or resignation, albeit one best redressed through testimony, the liberation of telling one’s story. The narrative climax of *TWB* implies as much during the scene in which Samaria Rice tells her version of her son Tamir’s murder. This scene requires particular attention for two reasons. First, it draws a vivid parallel between the historical dangers and risks that Black people have faced while traveling through the United States throughout the mid-20th century (narrated during the first two-thirds of the film), and the continuous culture of hostility and racial prejudice that African Americans still face today in the United States. By underscoring that those hostilities remain commonplace, the film refuses both to allow a narrative of historical “progress” and to enable denials of how much white supremacy remains a structuring force. Though the death of Tamir Rice is the climactic focus in *TWB*, watching it with knowledge of the dozens of innocent Black men

and women murdered since the film's release only affirms the necessity of its "wake work." The struggle to show that Black lives matter is ongoing.

The second and more salient reason the storytelling scene of Samaria Rice operates as *TWB*'s climax is the combination of documentary evidence from security camera footage of Tamir's shooting (what enters the frame) and of an oral retelling of the events surrounding what these cameras did and did not capture (what would otherwise escape the frame). Both the footage and the interview are overtly mediated representations. This undermines the commonplace supposition, as discussed earlier, that VR's immersive power is often achieved by bringing viewers inside an experience to convey the illusion that it is not mediated at all. Instead of older techniques that represent events through visual or verbal stories that an audience takes-in from outside or after the actual happening of the events being depicted, VR is thought to activate in viewers the sorts of perceptual presence associated with witnessing something first-hand, as participant observers in the story's happening.

The climax of *TWB*, however, takes a different tack. It refuses to give viewers the illusion of immersion in a central event's happening.⁴² Instead, viewers are immersed in something else: in this case, in the very representation of that event. In other words, the representation itself—here through both the security footage of Tamir being shot and Samaria's personal narrative of the tragedy—becomes that in which the viewer gets immersed. What viewers are made present to is representation itself, the immersive world of documentary *as* documentary. And the effect is to make salient what Ingold worried was being lost in ethnographic storytelling, namely, the "thinking in the world"⁴³ that comes from being implicated in the embodied and spatial power of encounters as they unfold. Sharpe might write about this as a matter of "redaction," of inverting what is typically seen and occluded in ethnographic images of Black people, so as to see their "individual and collective looks out past the white people who claimed power over them."⁴⁴ In *TWB*, the effect is achieved by seeing, by seeming to be among, a room full of people listening intently to Samaria's testimony. While the testimony itself might inspire empathy in a viewer positioned as witness to it, what is compelling is not the empathy generated by her story, but the witnessing of empathy activated in the other listeners in the diner. In other words, the power of VR storytelling here, is neither in witnessing nor in empathy alone: rather, it lies in witnessing empathy happening.

By foregrounding the representation of an event more than the event itself, the VR piece maintains the audience at a distance. In previous scenes, direct looks to the camera (and thus at the viewer) conferred presence to the viewer, or in other terms, positioned them in an embodied position. This results in situating the viewer on "the same map as [the characters'] suffering."⁴⁵ Just as an ethnographer, the viewer is located in the same place as the others—as one listener and one customer of the diner among others. The proximity established is that of sharing a common world in which each reality has an impact on the other. Yet, again like an ethnographer, the viewer witnesses with a distance, so that the piece does not become *about them*, about the viewer's own narcissistic embodiment of an other's feelings. This distance is reinforced physically by the limited kinesthetic access the viewer has to the virtual world.

Before writing this essay, we each had different haptic experiences viewing *TWB*. In Salt Lake City, UT, Chris experienced the VR piece in a mock-up diner booth in which visitors sat to wear the headset. He could reach out and grab napkins, feel the

plastic booth under his body, feel the Formica table in front of him and hold a laminated menu in his hand. Maud, however, experienced *TWB* at the International Film Festival of Bergen, Norway, without any external *mise-en-scène*, similarly to how any viewer would see it if accessing the work through the Oculus platform on a personal smartphone or VR headset. While the convergence of diegetic and metadiegetic elements in Chris's experience certainly enhances the sensation of immersion (at least in some scenes, since the viewer's place is not static but moves across the diner), this privileged mode of viewing is not accessible to most. Moreover, the discrepancy between moving the laminated menu in the material world and its immobility in the virtual one certainly reduces the cinematic "willing suspension of disbelief" or, in VR terms, the sensation of presence. More generally speaking, in *TWB*, the viewer's embodied experience of the virtual world is limited to sight (the limited interactivity being what distinguishes a 360-degree video from a proper VR experience). The viewer remains on the threshold, in-between presence and absence within the virtual world, not because of looking "at" their screen rather than "through" it,⁴⁶ but because of their inability to act in the virtual world. One of the reasons embodying another is inadequate in nonfiction VR (at least currently) is because of the risk in bringing along our own ways without keeping the proper distance of an ethnographer. Being simultaneously situated among a collectivity of listeners, and being the only one not visibly embodied or able to act, in fact leaves space for the telling of another's story.

What Murray observed back in 1997 remains true today: "we will need time to grow accustomed to combining participation with immersion, agency with story."⁴⁷ The metafictional, self-referential hijinks of storytelling, from Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* to the Netflix animated series *Big Mouth*, has long found fictional characters both admitting to their own position *as* characters and directly addressing audiences as such (be they listeners, readers, or viewers). VR offers—or promises to offer in an uncertain future—to enable viewers to exercise at least a limited form of agency while "in" an aesthetic experience. By merging immersion and participation, by situating viewers themselves as characters in and as witnesses to a story, VR uniquely plays on the schizophrenia of the contemporary media landscape, offering a counterpart to the audience of computer games, on-demand TV, web-series, and interactive cinema. Still, for now, as we have explored through *TWB*, it is the collective mediation of an event that situates us on the same plane as others in the virtual world, and it is by witnessing empathy that we may affectively cultivate our own. Both the historical and political contextualization of storytelling in *TWB*—and its refusal to deliver individual emotional accounts decoupled from collective affectivity—place the viewer in the in-between position of an ethnographer.

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Notes

1. Ian Skoggard and Alisse Waterston, "Introduction: Toward an Anthropology of Affect and Evocative Ethnography," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 26, no. 2 (2015): 109–20.
2. *Traveling While Black*, dir. Roger Ross William (Felix & Paul Studios, 2018), 360 Video.
3. Lieba Faier and Lisa Rofel, "Ethnographies of Encounter," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2014): 364.
4. Chris Milk, "How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine," *ted.com*, March 2015, https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine/transcript?language=en (accessed December 10, 2020). See also Harry Farmer, "A Broken Empathy Machine? Can Virtual Reality Increase Pro-Social Behaviour and Reduce Prejudice?" *Immerse*, September 30, 2019, <https://immerse.news/a-broken-empathy-machine-can-virtual-reality-increase-pro-social-behaviour-and-reduce-prejudice-cbcefb30525b> (accessed December 10, 2020); Jamie McRoberts, "Are We There Yet? Media Content and Sense of Presence in Non-Fiction Virtual Reality," *Studies in Documentary Film* 12, no. 2 (2017): 101–18; Mandy Rose, "The Immersive Turn: Hype and Hope in the Emergence of Virtual Reality as a Nonfiction Platform," *Studies in Documentary Film* 12, no. 2 (2018): 132–49.
5. John L. Jackson Jr., *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 14–15.
6. Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 98–99.
7. Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 142.
8. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 100.
9. *Ibid.*, 272.
10. Future scholarship about VR's emergent grammar might benefit from theories of visual and aural aesthetics, particularly by the likes of Tina M. Campt and Fred Moten, whose emphasis on difference and Blackness is particularly helpful to read alongside *Traveling While Black*. See Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
11. Catherine Fowler, "Into the Light: Re-Considering off-Frame and off-Screen Space in Gallery Films," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 6, no. 3 (2008): 257. Fowler follows Pascal Bonitzer in this regard.
12. *Ibid.*, 255.
13. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 108.
14. *Clouds over Sidra*, dir. Chris Milk and Gabo Arora (UNICEF, 2015), 360 Video.
15. Fowler, "Into the Light," 265.
16. "We live in an anti-Black world—a systemically anti-Black world; and, therefore, whites are not [simply] 'racists.' They too live in the same world in which we live. The truth that structures their minds, their 'consciousness,' structures ours." Sylvia Wynter, quoted in Christina Sharpe, "Black Studies: In the Wake," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 56–69.
17. Kate Nash, "Virtual Reality Witness: Exploring the Ethics of Mediated Presence," *Studies in Documentary Film* 12, no. 2 (2018): 120. See also Roger Silverstone, *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 172.
18. Nash, "Virtual Reality Witness," 125.
19. Lilie Chouliaraki, "Improper Distance: Towards a Critical Account of Solidarity as Irony," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 4 (2011): 373.
20. Maud Ceuterick, *Affirmative Aesthetics and Willful Women: Gender, Space and Mobility in Contemporary Cinema* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
21. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 21.
22. See Mel Slater et al., "First Person Experience of Body Transfer in Virtual Reality," *PLoS ONE* 5 no. 5 (2010): <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0010564>; Domna Banakou, Parasuram D. Hanumanthu, and Mel Slater, "Virtual Embodiment of White People in a Black

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- Sun Joo Ahn, Amanda Minh Tran Le, and Jeremy Bailenson, “The Effect of Embodied Experiences on Self–Other Merging, Attitude, and Helping Behavior,” *Media Psychology* 16, no. 1 (2013): 7–38.
23. On the contagiousness of affect, see Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Teresa Brennan, *Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Anna Gibbs, “Contagious Feelings: Pauline Hanson and the Epidemiology of Affect,” *Australian Humanities Review* 24 (2001): <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2001/12/01/contagious-feelings-pauline-hanson-and-the-epidemiology-of-affect/>; Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
 24. See George McHendry Jr. et al., “Rhetorical Critic(ism)’s Body: Affect and Fieldwork on a Plane of Immanence,” *Southern Communication Journal* 79, no. 4 (2014): 293–310; Candice Rai and Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, eds., *Field Rhetoric: Ethnography, Ecology, and Engagement in the Places of Persuasion* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2018); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
 25. Skoggard and Waterston, “Introduction,” 111.
 26. Tim Ingold, “That’s Enough about Ethnography!” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1 (2014): 386.
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. *Ibid.*, 391.
 29. Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 16.
 30. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581.
 31. Chris Ingraham, “The Suddener World: Photography and Ineffable Rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 50, no. 2 (2017): 142.
 32. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 116.
 33. N. Katherine Hayles, “Embodied Virtuality: Or How to Put Bodies Back into the Picture,” in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Anne Moser and Douglas MacLeod (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 1.
 34. *Ibid.*, 14.
 35. For more on the sensuous and the activity and passivity of the cinematic spectator, see Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
 36. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 21.
 37. *Ibid.*, 20.
 38. *Ibid.*, 14–15.
 39. *Ibid.*, 113.
 40. Elizabeth Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 141.
 41. *Ibid.*
 42. In this sense, *TWB* performs what Camppt describes as “the everyday practices of refusal enacted and inherited by dispossessed subjects” (*Listening to Images*, 4). Although Camppt is writing about photographic images, her insights about the aural aesthetics of visuality would as aptly apply to VR.
 43. Ingold, “That’s Enough about Ethnography!” 391.
 44. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 118.

45. Susan Sontag, quoted in Nash, “Virtual Reality Witness,” 121.
46. See Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 271. For more on “at” and “through” modes of attention, see Richard A. Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 178–79.
47. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 275.