

Listening for Pleasure

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In histories of colonized places, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people often have been cast in opposing roles: the former representing the past, the latter depicted as agents of change. Prior to its drainage in the 1920s, those who lived around Sumas Lake, British Columbia, interacted differently with its nature and culture. With an ear for shared as well as conflicting views, this paper focuses on existing oral testimonies of First Nations and Euro-Canadian people and attempts to articulate a larger domain of lake pleasures and possibilities by addressing the oral records with questions like "Which people spoke?" "In what forum?" And "To which ends?"

Pour le plaisir d'écouter

Dans l'histoire des lieux colonisés, on a souvent donné des rôles opposants aux Autochtones et aux Non Autochtones: les premiers représentant le passé, les derniers peints comme agents de changement. Avant le drainage du lac Sumas en Colombie-Britannique pendant les années vingt, ceux qui y habitaient, interagissaient différemment avec sa nature et sa culture. Tout en considérant des points de vue partagées ainsi que contraires, cet article vise les témoignages oraux actuels des Autochtones et des Euro-canadiens, tente de décrire de façon plus élaborée les plaisirs et possibilités lacustres et adresse ces témoignages avec des questions telles que "Qui parlaient?", "Dans quel forum parlaient-ils?" et "Dans quel but parlaient-ils?"

Oral historians who focus their inquiry on a particular *place* may involve themselves in a messy enterprise. Certainly, as Doreen Massey reminds us, "*places* have for centuries been . . . complex locations where numerous different, and frequently conflicting, communities intersected."¹ In the spring of 1993, the place in question was a so-called "natural" place, a lake in the Lower Fraser Valley of British Columbia. In 1894, at its 200-

year flood level, Sumas Lake stretched nearly 20 miles, touching Sumas Indian Reserves No. 6 and No. 7 in the east and the fringe of the then-village of Chilliwack in the west. Thirty years later, Sumas Lake was drained and "reclaimed" for agriculture. With Aboriginal² people on one side, Euro-Canadian settlers on the other, and a contested and dynamic lake environment in the middle, the elements might be arranged neatly into one of two durable themes of the west: wasteland redeemed or Eden destroyed. Yet one does not begin an oral history project with the idea that dominant narratives will go unchallenged.

A major problem with both stories is that First Nations people are rarely depicted as agents of change, as shapers of place and history. White men enter unmarked nature and alter it through labour: Aboriginal people exist in the "timelessness" of nature, shaped by the environment. The romantic loss-of-paradise story preferred by environmentalists is reinforced in part by a belief that, as Richard White puts it, "the original human relation with nature was one of leisure and that the first white men in North America glimpsed and briefly shared that relation."³ The title "Listening for Pleasure" admits my initial "environmentally concerned" desire to hear pre-drainage stories of harmonious human and non-human relations: it also affirms the pleasures of listening to the memories of community elders. However, recorded communications between individuals and groups, in both public and private spaces, then and now, are complex and sometimes discordant processes of co-operation, strategy and translation. Doing the oral history of a place like Sumas Lake includes the straightforward matter of asking "What do you remember about it?" But in order to articulate a larger domain of lake pleasures and possibilities, we also might begin to address already existing oral records with questions like "Which people spoke?" "In which forum?" "For which reasons?" And "To which ends?"

Hoping to locate some orally transmitted Sumas Lake knowledge in time, I chose to follow the relatively recent stream of oral history back to documents that are neither typically linked to this methodology nor commonly connected to Sumas Lake. These transcriptions of government commission testimonies are not the products of oral history. However, immersed within the context of the creative, engaged process of oral history, such records may help to enlarge and enliven Marc Bloch's definition of history: "a thing in movement."⁴ Admittedly, oral history, with notable exceptions,⁵ still is located within a marginal area of the academy's activities, a zone flooded by local museum societies and enthusiasts. Many academic historians—like speculators gazing anxiously at the field during freshet—stake their claims on written documents, their semblance of solid ground. However, on entering the adjacent field of anthropology, oral historians are encouraged



Plate 1: Sumas Lake Bottom 1994: view from Vedder Mountain looking towards Sumas Mountain, five miles north. In 1894, Sumas Lake expanded to touch these two mountains. In June of 1924, after almost a full year of pumping with Canada's largest pump facility, the last waters of Sumas Lake were drained into the Vedder Canal (visible here) and directed out to the Fraser River (behind Sumas Mountain). Photograph by L. Cameron.

to understand their research as a fluid community process, not simply as material to be mined for fact. Such an approach brings to community history an awareness that the process of oral communication is not something that can be separated from nuggets of truth.

As oral historians interact intimately with records, real people and places, assumptions may shift, compelling them to confront the dynamics of historical construction. As Renato Rosaldo suggests, the identification of "our" stories becomes important as we explore "their" stories, looking for links between them.⁶ Influenced by the arguments of feminist and socialist historians, I initially felt that my own oral history would raise or salvage voices that dominant narratives lacked or ignored.⁷ Yes, Sumas Lake had been drained, but this action hardly proved that Sumas Lake and the surrounding floodlands were valueless to all the people who lived there. My own love of nearby lakes—Cultus, Lindeman, Harrison and Hicks—predisposed me to prick up my ears at any mention of lake value, particularly as a source of pleasure. A lake means the "beach" and it certainly means swimming. In Western culture, the liminal zone of the beach is linked to new codes of behaviour for women as well as men.⁸ Despite my suspicion that popular notions of the beach would change a great deal across time, the photographs of families and joyous young women swimming and boating at Sumas Lake—snapped, of course, prior to drainage—continued to feed synchronic notions of recreational "Super Natural" British Columbia.

Only when I finally began to *listen* for pleasure, in my own oral histories and in the oral records of others, did my categories of Sumas Lake's benefits begin to blur. I did not locate the high ground where the "unprivileged" spoke for themselves. However, listening for value in that lake, I encountered descriptions of an enjoyed resource base that was not always partitioned into useful and useless areas. The divisions that individuals do make perhaps answer more clearly why the ecosystem was destroyed rather than why people lived with it. The oral record of Sumas Lake is extensive, and this study does not begin to be comprehensive: rather, this brief discussion is an attempt to extend an opportunity to develop different interpretations and yet reflect a lake of potentially shared experience.

The oral histories of those who seek to rethink the past with an awareness of First Nations sometimes contain the disturbing assumption that Aboriginal and White people can only be portrayed in opposing roles. As George Miles remarks of much ethnohistory in general, "the plots render Indians more interesting and important as foils for white history than as significant participants in it."⁹ Oral histories involving Natives as interviewees may be subject to similar problems. Imbert Orchard's absorbing 1982 *Floodland and Forest* features testimonies of Stó:lō people and

settlers from the 1960s, gathered by theme into sound bites, which reflect their original use in a CBC Radio series. We see none of Orchard's questions, but we can get some indication of his own moral assumptions from his description of the area's first White settlers:

For them, it was a country without legend or tradition. They had left their ghosts behind them. A lake, however beautiful, was just a lake, a mountain a mountain, waiting for some surveyor to give it a name and measurement. A tree was just a tree—and probably in the way. As for animal life, they brought much of it with them, seeing it largely as a soulless commodity to be bred and slaughtered for profit. And whereas the aborigines filled their homeland with a throng of meaningful presences, white people, finding it was used only for hunting, fishing and gathering, simply saw an empty wilderness, awaiting the day when such as they would make it over—as a matter of right—in their own image.¹⁰

Orchard's description is a powerful indictment of the settlers whose comments he proceeds to edit into generally celebratory passages about hardy and resourceful White men and women. If a book is an environment in itself, then this book has two separate spheres. Focusing on separation rather than interchange after the fur trade, Native people do not mingle freely with Whites on the page. No Natives, for example, are given space to describe their stories of Sumas Lake beside the edited memories of White settlers.¹¹ Native ideas are respected, but, like the static museum piece, supposedly take us "back into a very different world."¹²

Oral histories of Sumas Lake, told by the White settlers of the Fraser Valley, were created as early as 1945 when Major J. S. Matthews of the Vancouver City Archives travelled out to Huntingdon on the B.C. Electric commuter railway to interview Mrs. Thomas Fraser York. The transcript does not list the major's questions, but York's transcribed answers show that she spoke of the "millions and millions of mosquitos" on Sumas Prairie; "lots of deer, grouse and duck"; and the old Indian who got the mail for her family by taking a canoe across Sumas Lake, a man who "called himself 'Jim York' after us."¹³

The Chilliwack Museum Society and the Matsqui-Sumas-Abbotsford Museum Society (MSA) have been involved in collecting, transcribing and archiving local oral histories for over two decades. Here, in the spring of 1993, I began listening to the gentle questions of men and women and the entertaining answers of gifted storytellers. The tapes of Oliver Wells, an amateur ethnographer and a third-generation descendant of a local settler family, constitute a major source of Stó:lō oral histories. A 1987 compilation



Plate 2: Sumas Lake, 1901. A picnic party, and sail boat at Sumas Lake Ridge. (Photo credit: City of Vancouver Archives, Out. P. 840, N. 391.)

of his interviews with friends in *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbors* is, in part, a story of Native-White collaboration. In the 1960s, Wells could speak to men and women who had adult memories of the lake, such as Mr. and Mrs. Kelleher, elders living in Matsqui, west of Sumas Lake:

Oliver Wells – “The draining of Sumas Lake made a difference in the country, didn’t it?”

Mrs. Kelleher – “Oh, my, yeah. My, we used to have a good time up on that lake, when we had the gas boat, and we’d get a crowd and go way up there to get out of the mosquitoes.”¹⁴

While making community history about a world that existed long ago, the question of who speaks for the oral record is largely determined by who is left to speak. In 1993, a person who recalled Sumas Lake as a young adult would be in his or her nineties. Edward Kelly, a Stó:lō elder who was born in 1900, spoke to Janelle Vienneau of the MSA in 1987. He spent some time at the lake as a child before he was sent away to the Coqualeetza Residential School. His mother and father lived northwest of the lake at the Kilgard (Sumas #6) Reserve.

Vienneau – “Well (laughs), amazing huh. What do you remember about Sumas Lake?”

Kelly – “Sumas Lake. . . . I mentioned about the sturgeon and all varieties of salmon and trouts and the ducks were out there by the millions—way out, ducks and the geese. And the people had the small canoes in those days, and they—like for a Sunday outing—they would go out, like from the small slough into the big slough, then into the Sumas Lake and they would have a picnic, just family affair. I’m referring to my family. Mother used to make up the lunches and my dad would bring his rifle along and if we needed deer, he’d kill a deer. But the deer had to be down right near the water. If the deer was up a little, up on the side of the mountain he just won’t. . . . He just overlooks that deer because there’s always deer all around. But the deer must be near the water before he would shoot it. Then he would bleed a deer and put his rifle away. And dad always brought his fishing line and dad would be trolling around up and down, mother would be knitting and us kids would be swimming in the lake. That’s a Sunday outing.”¹⁵

Childhood memories told to me include those of a man who cycled by the lake on an adventurous trip to Cloverdale,¹⁶ a woman who went to the lake for summer vacations where “we swam before breakfast, we swam before lunchtime—well dinner at noon—we swam again in the afternoon



Plate 3: Edward Kelly at Sumas, B.C., 1912. (Photo credit: Matsqui-Sumas-Abbotsford Museum Society, P1554.)

and had a swim before we went to bed."¹⁷ These two descendants of the first White settlers perhaps had more romantic and exciting images of the area than their parents. Speaking to Imbert Orchard in 1963, Mrs. Fadden's daughter read extracts from her mother's journal regarding the flood of 1894. Mrs. Fadden had lived at the far end of Sumas Lake for almost 10 years: she was very pregnant and had three small children, yet she wrote laconically of the expected high water—no panic . . . the day they start building the boat, the water is "spreading over garden, over orchard, quite high. Fine day."¹⁸ For the daughter, both danger and beauty were acute: that high water was "a beautiful sight. Wild roses used to bloom just at the top of the water. And there was the very lovely perfume that came from them as the water came up to them—a sight that was pretty, even though it was disastrous."¹⁹

As people spoke of Sumas Lake as a recreational spot, the persuasive visual images of lake pleasures were confirmed. However, something else emerged in the oral interviews that the camera failed to capture. Many speakers developed the concept that the flood lake provided an unofficial commons, the undivided space that, in theory, belongs to everyone in the community. Management was local, not national. As the writer Gary Snyder describes it, the commons is

. . . necessary for the health of the wilderness because it adds big habitat, overflow territory, and room for wildlife to fly and run. It is essential even to an agricultural village economy because its natural diversity provides the many necessities and amenities that the privately held plots cannot. It enriches the agrarian diet with game and fish. The shared land supplies firewood, poles and stone for building, clay for the kiln, herbs, dye plants, and much else, just as in a foraging economy. It is especially important as seasonal or full-time open range for cattle, horses, goats, pigs, and sheep.²⁰

Several men spoke about grazing cattle and sheep by Sumas Lake: people from as far away as Chilliwack would bring their animals to feed on the grasslands in low water time.²¹ Kelly also talked about this particular use of the lake edges with Vienneau.

Vienneau – "Would you know the value of the land when the lake was drained?"

Kelly – "The value?"

Vienneau – "The value, how much it would sell for."

Kelly – "When I was a boy the land was one dollar an acre and my dad said when he was a boy it was fifty cents an acre. And the people

were not interested in it because the people would say 'why buy it? Why buy the land? When we could use the land for free?' Said, 'there are no fences.' The cattle, all the stock, ran out on Sumas Prairie. Say when my dad, now when it's milking time in the evening, would go out looking for the cows. The milk cows—if we see one cow we know our cows are there. And same with the horses, the needing any of the horses for any type of work, we would have to go out on the Sumas Prairie. If we see one horse we know our horses are there. Then for milking cows—my dad, when through milking, he would let the cows out of the barn. Then the cows would go out with the rest of the cattle and in the morning we had to look for them again."

In reference to the commons' rules, Fred Zink spoke of the "gentleman's agreement" people followed in order to share the space and wild fodder peacefully.²² No one spoke of tensions or competing interests. In the interviews with white settlers, comments about Native people were rare and unsolicited, such as Charlie Power's remark about Sumas Prairie: "There was an Indian trail down there. They didn't bother us too much. They were pretty good."²³ Similarly, First Nations men and women rarely spoke of non-Natives. Despite this, the recreational area enjoyed by local Whites was also the beach enjoyed by local Natives: the Native fishing grounds were in same the lake where non-Natives caught their fish. However, this information was not on the same tape.

In these archived interviews, conflict was not mentioned, perhaps, in part, because the goal of the community history interviewers and interviewees was to create harmony. The "one-on-one" or "one-on-a few" method of oral interviewing did not originate with oral history, but in its ideological attempt to widen the range of voices in history, the necessity of creating a comfortable atmosphere conducive to the establishment of trust and support has long been recognized. Since the widespread use of tape recorders and the blossoming of public history projects in the 1960s, oral history has often been championed as the egalitarian method *par excellence* of creating history by and for the people. The sessions become feminist encounters, social and socialist meetings, "shored up by liberal amounts of coffee and cookies."²⁴ The memories that reinforce ideals of community co-operation are credible expressions in the friendly encounter provided by the serious excuse of history making.

For evidence of discord, I needed to look no further than government commission testimonies. The interviews conducted in hearings and royal commissions often form what oral historian Paul Thompson has called "a

peculiarly intimidating form of interview, in which the lone informant was confronted by the whole committee."²⁵ Who speaks is not just a question of who has the right to speak—but who has the nerve to speak. Although often couched in polite or official language, I found that the Native-White conflict that was so muted in oral history interviews formed a large part of the dynamic. For instance, in the government's bid to quell a farmer's threatened tax revolt after the lake drainage, landholders were called to testify before the legislature's agricultural committee in December 1925. David Chadsey, an ex-dyking commissioner, was on the stand:

Patterson – "You know the conditions as they are now; would you rather pay this tax, or would you rather go back to 2 years ago before the dyke was up?"

Chadsey – "I did not need the dyke, but I was public-spirited enough to vote for it so that the community would come under it, so that we could live, and not live like Indians."²⁶

We go then to a forum that existed when Sumas Lake still existed, when the context is provided by a watery place and the historical background of government officials passing through, seeking order.

An oral culture created meaning in the Sumas environment millennia before any European visited and wrote home about it. In the context of colonization, fences and survey markers tangibly demonstrate the links between the spoken word, the written word and things. Isabel Hofmeyr, in her study of boundary-making in the Transvaal region of South Africa, suggests, "fences, for example, 'write' certain forms of authority into the countryside, and by representing the thin fixed line of the boundary in the earth, they imprint the textual world of maps, treaties, and surveying on landscape."²⁷ Fences are unnecessary intrusions for oral or paraliterate societies whose boundaries are more fluid and negotiable as they conform to a dynamic and seasonal landscape. Avoiding negotiation, invading powers could manipulate boundaries with the tangible authority of fence and paper.

In one extreme case, the colonial official, Joseph Trutch, disregarded oral instructions concerning the allotment of what he considered overly generous Indian reserve acreages in the Lower Fraser Valley of British Columbia. Oral communication for Trutch, even if delivered by a previous governor, was an "indefinite authority."²⁸ Like the settlers who moved into the valley, Native people could remove survey markers and they likely did. However, markers were simply replaced and in the Fraser Valley fences and survey lines remained, as Cole Harris puts it, "pervasive forms of disciplinary power, backed by a property owner, backed by the law and requiring little

official supervision."²⁹

However, a lake is difficult to pin down. Flooded two months of the year, even the lands surrounding Sumas Lake were remarkably resistant to fencing, accurate printed maps and consistent measurements. The lake and its marginal land were in the railway belt, and, after Confederation, title was retained by the Dominion government until 1924.³⁰ Sumas Lake was not a co-operative feature of the new colonial possessions that translated easily into much-desired farmland. The idea of selling the 10,000-plus acres of lake bottom lands to recoup the construction cost of dykes had been in the pages of the *Victoria Colonist* as early as 1873.³¹ Nearly fifty years later, people still were canoeing and sailing across the lake, and grazing cattle around its edges.

After European settlement in British Columbia, the province continuously blocked recognition and settlement of Aboriginal title. As of 1912, the federal government, though dissatisfied, remained willing to accommodate the province's refusal to extinguish Aboriginal title. In September 1912, Victoria and Ottawa agreed to participate in the McKenna-McBride Commission, the joint provincial-federal venture created to "finally adjust all matters relating to Indian Affairs in the Province of British Columbia," except that overriding concern of Native people—title to their homelands and waters.³² The commissioners travelled for three years, from 1913–1916, visiting most places where Natives lived, hearing testimony and making land reduction or addition recommendations. Certain bands, such as the Kitwanga of the Nass Agency, refused to deal with the commission because their question of Native title could not be discussed.

In its attempt to forge a final solution to the "Indian problem," the commission was to fail. The commission lied to B.C. Natives that no reductions in reserve acreages would be made without band approval. Although the commission spent three seasons in the New Westminster Agency, it effectively was just another visitor passing through.³³ Like any transcription of an oral exchange, the written record is no substitute. The commission testimonies certainly were filtered and must be read with an awareness that not everything that was said was transcribed. A cynical approach to the commission records is appropriate: nevertheless, the gathered testimonies of those men and women who chose to co-operate with the commission must not be dismissed today. The transcripts, reprinted by the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, constitute an important public record and confirm in a written form privileged by a literate culture, that Native people understood and were extremely concerned with what was happening to them and to the places where they lived.

In contrast to the reluctance of First Nations people to jump on the

commission bandwagon, groups of White settlers, boards of trade and women's institutes were keen to have their opinions regarding appropriate land and water management considered. Their wide range of ideas for reducing Indian reserves were based on shifting concepts of public pleasure as well as private monetary gain. When writing about pioneer perceptions of the west, Roderick Nash stated that these newcomers did not love or aesthetically appreciate the wilds, but craved to destroy them. "They conceived of themselves as agents in the regenerating process that turned the ungodly and useless into a beneficent civilization."³⁴ Sumas Lake, surrounded by lush prairies, populated for centuries but largely pre-empted by newcomers in the late 19th century, may not have fit popular notions of "wilderness." Indeed, the established Native labour pool was integral to the success of White settler "improvement" projects. Any contention that these workers were to move aside from their own territory to make room for ever-more "improvements" required reinforcement at an official level to make dispossession legal.

At a meeting with the municipality of Sumas, the farmer's institute and women's institute on 11 January 1915, White settlers asked the commission to release one of the Sumas reserves for a public park. Giving her speech the weight of an official written document and infusing the sort of "homefront" rhetoric, which found particular resonance in the midst of the First World War, Mrs. Fadden read her petition aloud:

... Our Motto is 'For Home and Country.' We feel like we would be taking nothing from the Indians that they really desire or need. ... It does not appear that their race will multiply to any extent where this land would be necessary to them, and I am sure it is much better to have them congregated in the one location at the mountain-side rancherie than to have these small holdings of land scattered here and there among the farms of the white settlers. They merely improve their farms to any extent—their habits of living are quite different, and their success as neighbours to us, I am doubtful to. Personally I have lived by this reserve land for over twenty-eight years, and I would enjoy seeing that tangle of underbrush and worthless timber removed, the valuable timber—which may be consumed by careless fire at any time—bring its value and a beauty spot created here in time, which would be an inspiration to many.³⁵

The following day the Commission moved on to the Sumas Reserve #6 at Kilgard. Ke Ha Jim, wife of Old Man (Jim) York, the same man who worked for Mrs. Thomas Fraser York, claimed title to the potential park, Reserve #7: "My husband is dead and I own the land and my boy is unable to work

because he is an invalid."³⁶ York's daughter stated that she did not want anyone else to work the land. However, hearings of White and Native concerns formally were separated and Mrs. Fadden's complaints about unsuitable neighbours went uncontested. Perhaps Mrs. Fadden's women's institute might have retracted a request for this reserve if they had witnessed Ke Ha Jim's testimony—but maybe not. The status of women was in a state of transition during and after the war, and, as educated White women strove to define and demonstrate their own public worth as civilizers, they simultaneously required a definition of the worthless and uncivilized.

The male chief of the Sumas Band, Selesmlton (Ned), was called as the primary witness. A confident oral speaker, he attempted to establish his own agenda and his own standards of trust at the outset of the public hearing: "I am glad to see you people come into this house, and I am going to tell you the truth of what I am going to say."³⁷ Chief Ned went on to place the contemporary situation in an historical framework, noting change over time and reduced access to food resources:

That is the land and that is what the old people know, that is what they used to say. The Indians have always been poor, that is the reason I have always been worrying because I know the old people used to say that the White people will be shoving you around all over this open prairie to get our food, we used to get our meat, ducks and fish out in this lake (Sumas) and on the prairie.

His words were statements of connection, of ownership, reinforced and constituted by the surrounding territory where his people made "half our living" from the "fish and ducks and things like that."³⁸

In the process of ascertaining the band's success as agriculturists in an area seen as prime arable land, the commission encountered farmers with many head of cattle but extreme reluctance to transform places of water into places of land.

Q – "Do you get plenty of hay?"

A – "We don't get hardly any timothy hay—we depend upon the wild hay.

Q – "Could there be any land reclaimed here by dyking?"

A – "I could not say. I am against the dyking because that will mean more starvation for us."

Q – "Why do you think that you would be starved out if this land were dyked?"

A – "Because the lake is one of the greatest spawning grounds there is and this dyking would cut it off and in that way would cut off our fish supply."³⁹

The commission's inability to sustain relations of trust with Native people, rebuffing questions as basic as the chief's query, "I want to find out what is the meaning of this commission," is on record. Significantly, Chief Ned's word was not the highest authority to the commissioners, who tested the chief's facts against those of the Indian agent the following month.⁴⁰ In this common practice of the commission, Indian agents were not necessarily advocates of the ideas of those they were to represent, but asserted their own values.⁴¹

Q – "I suppose the wooded hillside and the portion of the land that overflows contributes largely to the feeding of their stock?"

A – "Yes, they depend upon the land on the Reserve for feed for all their stock. When the high water comes the low land is of no value to them and they have to shift their cattle up to the high land and they remain there until the water subsides, and two months after the water goes off the land it is possible to cut a fairly good crop of hay. The growth is very rapid and it is on this second growth of hay that they winter their stock."

...

Q – "About the duck-hunting—they complained that white men shot ducks there at night and sometimes killed the Indian's tame geese—the Commission stated that the matter would be looked into—has anything been done in that respect?"

A – "In regard to men hunting in the night?"

Q – "Yes."

A – "No. I have heard nothing further."

Q – "Have they an Indian Constable on that Reserve?"

A – "No . . . for the reason that I don't think there is any member of that tribe that would be suitable."⁴²

Besides creating an undeniable record of Native dissatisfaction, the McKenna-McBride Commission politicized Native individuals and groups. Andrew Paull, a translator for the commission, became, along with the Reverend Peter Kelly, leaders of the newly formed Allied Indian Tribes of B.C., which worked to oppose acceptance of the McKenna-McBride recommendations and forward claims to title as well as water, hunting and fishing rights.⁴³ In a meeting of the executives of the Allied Tribes and the head of the Indian Affairs Department of the Canadian government on 7 August 1923, Peter Kelly asked,

Is it possible at all to get more lands, where lands are needed? And it is granted, I think, that in the New Westminster Agency, especially in Chilliwack Valley, Fraser Valley and the other parts of that

Agency, where people will be forced to make their living by agriculture—following agricultural pursuits, they will have to have more land if they are going to be able to compete with their white brethren at all.⁴⁴

Kelly and Paull anticipated the negative response—only open Crown lands were available for additional reserves under the commission's terms of operation. The only time Sumas Lake apparently was mentioned at this conference was when George Matheson, representing the "Sardis group of Chilliwack Indians," defined his tribal territory in relation to the lake. "The Chilliwack tribal territory is right to Sumas Lake, that is the tribal territory, there was no boundary at that time, it runs beyond the boundary right down to Fraser River."⁴⁵ The lake was still a lake during the commission. However, by the time the Ottawa government affirmed the McKenna-McBride report as the final adjustment of B.C. Indian affairs in 1924, the lake bottom had been transferred to the province, which in turn quickly offered the land to private buyers.

Together with the Reverend Peter Kelly and their attorneys, Paull was ready to advance the Allied Indian Tribes' cause all the way to the British Privy Council. In 1927, the Canadian Parliament averted this possibility by holding, in Ottawa, the *Special Committee Hearing to Inquire into the Claims of the Allied Indian Tribes and British Columbia, as Set forth in their Petition submitted to Parliament in June 1926*. The extremely unpleasant environment of this committee is evident even in the filtered transcript.⁴⁶ Integral documents were withheld from the Allied Indian Tribes and the statements and demands of their chief consul, Mr. O'Meara, were called "rot," "nonsense," "piffle" and a "scandalous waste of time." Secretary Paull brought up the issue of water rights: "The reason the Indians claim foreshores on reserves in tidal waters is because the foreshore is just as necessary to the Indians as the reservation is."⁴⁷

Definitions constituted a great deal of the debate. A House of Commons member mused about the spatial ramifications of a foreshore: "Presumably what they want is the riparian rights and the water lots, whatever they might be, in front of the reserves. There is no such thing as foreshores on lakes; there might be, I suppose, between high and low water, but really the term does not apply to a lake or a river."⁴⁸ The B.C. Indian commissioner located the idea in a temporal framework:

An Indian could not take up water in the olden days, and the Commissioners did the best they could with the water allotments with the allotment of land. It was taken for granted that they had some value, but under the British Columbia Water Act these water

allotments had no status whatever, and the only way an Indian can get water is by way of license under the provision of the British Columbia Water Act.⁴⁹

However, this culture of argument regarding the value of both water and land to Native people—still in early stages in the development of shared vocabulary and respectful conduct—was destroyed after the hearing. The committee found no factual basis for unextinguished Aboriginal title. Changes were then made to the *Indian Act* that prevented Native people from seeking legal redress until the section was repealed in 1951.

Over the decades since the lake disappeared, comments about Sumas Lake have, as historian Joy Parr once wrote about a strike, “worn smooth, standardized in order, diction and cadence; shorn of dissonance in pursuit of a guarded social peace.”⁵⁰ Seated around the History Circle of White elders in Chilliwack’s old city hall, the descriptions I already had heard on archived tapes and in oral history books were repeated: lots of mosquitos, good for duck hunting and picnics. When I privately posed the same questions to the people whom I had listened to earlier on tape, I would hear the same tone, sometimes the same words. Promising anonymity, I tried to work against the sympathetic, standard questions of interviews past. The results were silences, dissonance, disruption and even a request to stop the tape—a request always fulfilled. Yes, a lot of pleasure, a lot of resources were gone, but emotion was mixed; it had happened long ago and people had tried to adapt to the changes. The entire world had changed in seventy years, not just this one part of the valley.

Having read the bitter words of commission testimonies, I returned to the process of interviewing Stó:lō elders with a new awareness of personal and political ties to water and landscape. One man, after speaking fondly of blowing across the frozen lake using his jacket as a sail, mentioned that in the 1920s he used his car to drive political leaders such as Andrew Paull and George Matheson to their speaking engagements at local reserves, helping them “to help the people.” He had no photos of the lake, but began the interview by searching for the morning newspaper, excited by an article that he wanted to show me. The front page story regarding B.C. Premier Mike Harcourt’s stop in Hamburg on his 1994 European tour began: “A prominent B.C. native leader tore into Greenpeace and the German people here Wednesday, accusing them of hypocrisy and of having a patronizing and romantic view of Aboriginal people.”⁵¹ He wanted to know what I thought of the article before he began to speak about Sumas Lake. As the interviewee, I learned that the commons of Sumas Lake oral history remained alive and contentious.

Oral history is a place of mediation, where events are shaped and translated, where concepts of community and nature are generated. What provided pleasure at Sumas Lake? To my initial satisfaction, I located the beach. Yet pleasure was also about labouring because pleasure meant having some sense of control over your life. Pleasure is about being listened to. Separating the voices of First Nations people and Euro-Canadians tended to silence the former and privilege the latter's "pleasure." To develop the potential of the oral record, whereby we avoid a simple condemnation or celebration of dominant narratives, we must find ways to expand its scope. Asking questions regarding the context of oral records can help open values to discussion. Certainly, an attempt to "mix" different voices may be somehow connected to a fixation with original Edenic purity.⁵² And this, too, is open for questioning. Oral historians who attempt to span carefully maintained boundaries forged of politeness, silence and tight essay structure do not do so because of their innocence or victimhood. Fully intertwined in the process, they can try to listen self-reflectively.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Doreen Massey, "A Place Called Home?" in *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 164. In his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Society and Nature* (London: Fontana, 1976), Raymond Williams states that *place* is one of the most complex words in the English language. Anthropologist Wayne Suttles problematized a simple equation of place and community in the 1960s when he suggested that Coast Salish ideas of community may be based more on kin and intervillage ties than on the place of the village or reserve. See Wayne Suttles, "The Persistence of Intervillage Ties among the Coast Salish," *Coast Salish Essays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), pp. 209-20.
- 2 Note on terminology: I use the terms "Aboriginal," "Native" or "First Nations" to refer to Canada's original inhabitants. The Stó:lō, including those on the Sumas No. 6 (Kilgard) Reserve, are Aboriginal people living in the Lower Fraser drainage basin of southwestern British Columbia. The term "Euro-Canadian" and "White" describes myself and designates people of European descent who settled in the Lower Fraser Valley. "Indian" is employed occasionally

- for governmental terms such as "Indian Reserve" and in quotations from historical sources.
- 3 Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work For a Living?': Work and Nature" in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 175.
 - 4 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 12.
 - 5 See, for instance, Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).
 - 6 Renato Rosaldo, "Doing Oral History," *Social Analysis* 4 September 1980): 89.
 - 7 See, for instance, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991) and Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
 - 8 Rob Shields, "Ritual Pleasures of a Seaside Resort," *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991) pp. 73-116.
 - 9 George Miles, "To Hear an Old Voice: Rediscovering Native Americans in American History," in *Under An Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, eds. William Cronon, George Miles and Jay Gitlin (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), p. 55.
 - 10 Imbert Orchard, *Floodland and Forest*, Sound Heritage Series no. 37 (Victoria: BCARS, Sound and Moving Image Division, 1983), p. 18.
 - 11 In 1967, Orchard heard a history of Sumas Lake told by Joe Louie, an elder featured in *Floodland and Forest*; British Columbia Archives and Record Services (hereafter BCARS), Imbert Orchard, "Mr. Joe Louie," (4/1/67), Cassettes 437-1&2, Sound and Moving Division. See Chapter 3, "Memory Device."
 - 12 Orchard, *Floodland*, p. 7.
 - 13 Major J. S. Mathews, "Mrs. Thomas Fraser York, Huntingdon, B.C.," City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter CVA), add. MS 54, vol. 13, York, Thomas Fraser.
 - 14 Oliver Wells, edited by Ralph Maud, Brent Galloway and Marie Weeden, *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbors*, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987), p. 189.
 - 15 Ed Kelly; (Matsqui-Sumas-Abbotsford Museum Society Archive (hereafter MSA), AH#97. This version of the tape transcription differs somewhat from the MSA transcript in that I have removed indications of speech pauses after consulting with the speaker.
 - 16 Mr. T, interview at his home, 22 March 1994.
 - 17 Mrs. M, interview on the lake bottom, 22 March 1994.
 - 18 Orchard, *Floodland*, p. 59.
 - 19 Ibid., p. 21.
 - 20 Gary Snyder, "The Place, the Region and the Commons," *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), p. 30.
 - 21 Charlie Power, Chilliwack Historical Society Archive (hereafter CHSA), add. MS 401: Fred Zink, in Orchard, *Floodland*, p. 24; Ed Kelly, MSA, AH#97; Mr. T, interview at his home, 22 March 1994.

- 22 Orchard, *Floodland*, p. 21.
- 23 Charlie Power, CHSA, Add MSS 401.
- 24 Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember* (Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books, 1982), p. 10.
- 25 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 105. However, as Keith Carlson suggested it is also important to remember instances when the dynamic was reversed, such as the 1878 meeting in which Indian Reserve Commissioner Gilbert Malcolm Sproat alone confronted a group of Lower Fraser Valley chiefs who protested that incoming settlers were claiming land that Native people required.
- 26 BCARS, GR 929, box 48, file 8, *Sumas Dyke Evidence, Agricultural Committee, Mon., 7th December 1925*, p. 152.
- 27 Isabel Hofmeyr, "Nterata/The Wire: Fences, Boundaries, Orality, Literacy," in *International Annual of Oral History, 1990, Subjectivity and Multiculturalism in Oral History*, ed. Ronald Grele (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 70-71.
- 28 British Columbia, *Papers Connected with the Indian Land Question, 1850-1875* (Victoria: Government Printer, 1875), p. 43.
- 29 Cole Harris, "The Lower Mainland, 1820-81," *Vancouver and Its Region* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992), p. 67.
- 30 While the Dominion government held legal title to the Sumas Lake bottom and its marginal lands, the province administered water rights and supported drainage schemes in the railway belt. This sometimes uneasy division of powers affected the administration of Fraser Valley Indian Reserves. For information on Reserve Commissioner G.M. Sproat's efforts to have the province's 1878 Sumas Dyking Act disallowed and other related issues, see Cameron, "Openings to a Lake: Historical Approaches to Sumas Lake, B.C." (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1994), chapter 2; and Claudia Notzke, *Aboriginal Peoples and Natural Resources in Canada* (York: Captus University Publications, 1994), p. 15.
- 31 Bob Smith, "The Reclamation of the Sumas Lands" (typescript, 1982), p. 3.
- 32 Dana McFarland, "Indian Reserve Cut-Offs in British Columbia, 1912-1924: An Examination of Federal-Provincial Negotiations and Consultation with Indians" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1990), p. 45.
- 33 McFarland, "Cut-Offs," p. 78.
- 34 Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 43.
- 35 BCARS, add. MS 1056, *Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of B.C. 1913-1915* (Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs), p. 137.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

- 41 McFarland, "Cut-Offs," pp. 76-77.
- 42 Canada, Commission on Indian Affairs in General, 1913-1915 (B-1457), "Testimony of Indian agent for Sumas Indians in response to questions of Commissioner McKenna on Tuesday February 8th, 1915," p. 570.
- 43 Dianne Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 113.
- 44 Conference Minutes Between the Allied Indian Tribes of B.C. and Dr. D. Scott, 7-11 August 1923 (NESIKA), p. 47.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 46 Canada, Parliament, "Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons Appointed to Inquire Into the Claims of the Allied Indian Tribes of British Columbia, As Set Forth in Their Petition Submitted To Parliament in June 1926" (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1927), p. 66. Even Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy superintendent general of Indian Affairs, complained of the "lack of distinctness in the stenographic report" in his own statements.
- 47 "Special Joint Committee," pp. 125-26.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 126.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 50 Parr, *The Gender*, p. 97.
- 51 "BC Indian leader slams Germans, Greenpeace," *The Vancouver Sun*, 3 February 1994; and Mr. Y, interview at his home, 3 February 1994. In an interview with reporter Keith Baldrey, George Watts said, "They're talking down to us. It's the same old story—we're going to tell you what's best for you, we created this mess for you and we're now going to create the solution."
- 52 See Donna Haraway, "Universal Donors in a Vampire Culture," in *Uncommon Ground*, pp. 321-66, for an important discussion regarding the connections between categories of race and nature.