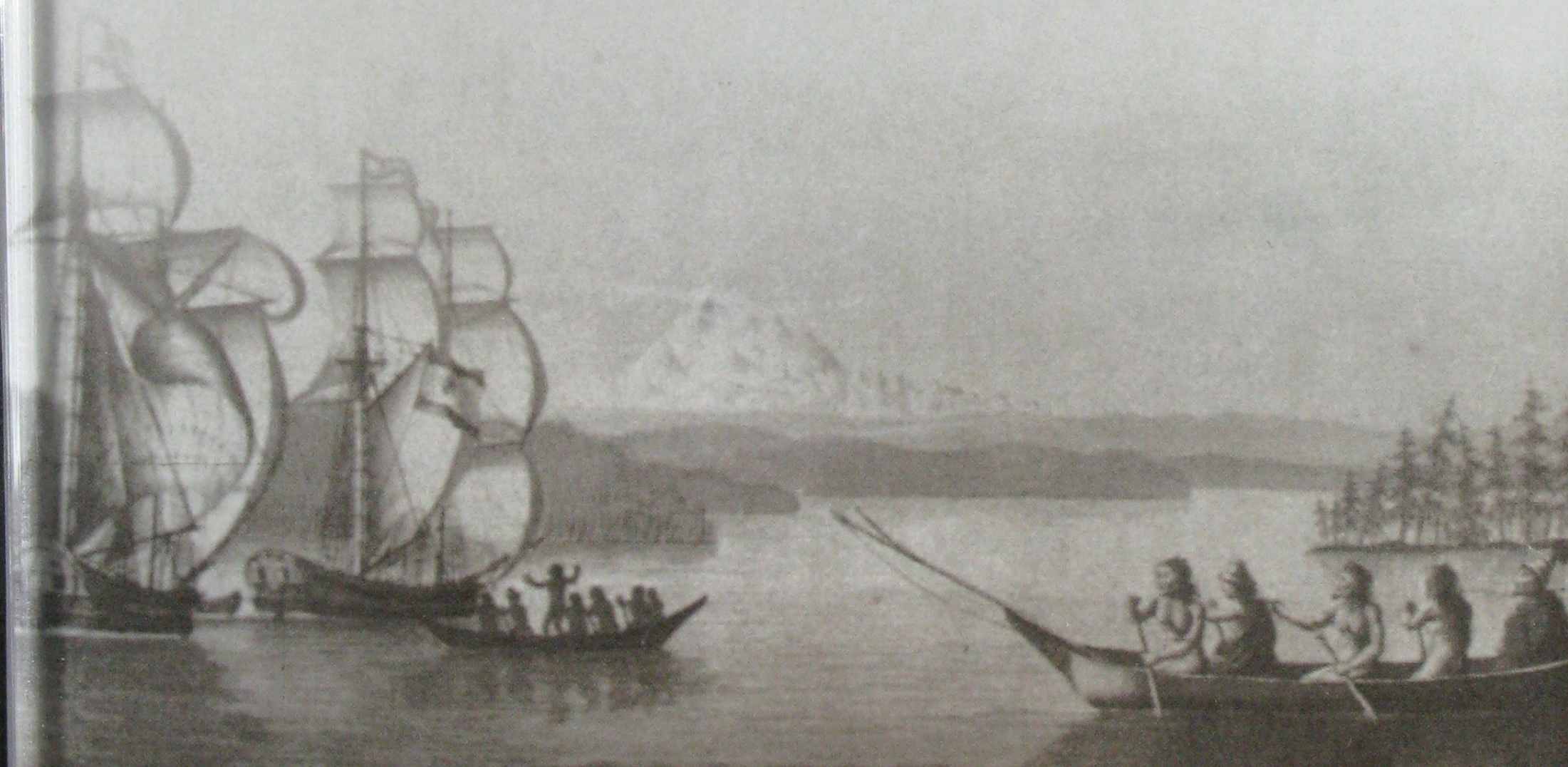


MYTH & STORIES OF INDIGENOUS-EUROPEAN CONTACT MEMORY



✦ EDITED BY JOHN SUTTON LUTZ ✦

Edited by John Sutton Lutz

Myth and Memory:
Stories of Indigenous-European
Contact



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Reflections on Indigenous History and Memory: Reconstructing and Reconsidering Contact

Keith Thor Carlson

Half a century ago, the historical philosopher R.G. Collingwood posited that the historian's ultimate goal was to re-create the conscious thoughts of a person from another era.¹ We know that in attempting to meet this objective, historians have occasionally committed some of the worst acts of intellectual colonialism, appropriating and misrepresenting the motivations, intentions, understandings, and voices of marginalized people from past eras. And yet the fault lies, perhaps, less in the exercise than in the failure to meet Collingwood's criteria. For him, the elusive objective could be achieved only through a careful questioning of one's sources and the application of what he referred to as "inferential" knowledge. Toward the same end, while advocating a similar method of intellectual questioning which he refers to as "dialogic reading," Dominick LaCapra has emphasized the moral obligation historians have to the people they seek to understand and depict. For LaCapra, the dialogic process "refers in a dual fashion both to the mutually challenging or contestatory interplay of forces in language and to the comparable interaction between social agents in various specific historical contexts."² Dialogic reading recognizes "that projection is to some extent unavoidable insofar as objects of inquiry are of intense concern to us because they pose questions that address significant values or assumptions."³ Thus, LaCapra suggests that we consider multiple meanings, often shaped by cultural context, for terms and expressions that might otherwise appear self-evident. Reasoning along similar lines in his remarkable and oft-cited essay "Thick Descriptions," Clifford Geertz points out that the anthropologist is "seeking in the widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with ... [Natives], a matter a great deal more difficult ... than is commonly recognized."⁴ In these regards, anthropologists and historians are engaged in very similar exercises. What historians seek to accomplish across a temporal divide, ethnographers strive to realize between cultures. The ethnohistorian seeks to do both.

The ethnohistoric exercise can never be merely academic. Whereas the forces of globalism have long compelled indigenous people to try and see the world as the colonizers do, representatives of colonial society have only recently begun to recognize the value of inverting this paradigm, of appreciating the value of indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing. To engage in this counter-colonizing process is to move toward creating an intellectual middle ground, an academic contact zone where good measure can be given to the tales of traders as well as the Transformers, and where the epistemological walls between modernist and postmodernist, between First and Second Nations, can be breached by the construction of ever thicker descriptions of metaphorical understanding – descriptions that might permit us, as the other's other, to at least begin to learn how Natives think, about history and memory, for example.⁵

In seeking this goal, academics are not operating in intellectual isolation. In Canada, for example, the Supreme Court of Canada recently acknowledged the validity of Native oral history in its judgment in *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* (1997). In Canadian jurisprudence, oral history is no longer merely equated with the Western legal concept of "hearsay." In a somewhat related decision of the previous year (*R. v. Van der Peet*), the same judicial body determined that where an Aboriginal community demonstrates that an activity had been an integral part of its ancestors' society prior to the assertion of British sovereignty (which in British Columbia was 1846),⁶ that activity could be protected as an Aboriginal right.

Many scholars and lawyers have rightly hailed these decisions as important and just. Taken together, they potentially validate not only Aboriginal historical experience, but also the way in which that experience is known or understood. In particular, they emphasize the significance of the contact era and the contact experience. Yet I know from experience that, since *Delgamuukw*, expert witnesses and First Nations organizations who have tried to introduce Native oral history into the courts have found that the legal forum remains unable or unwilling to adequately deal with Aboriginal oral history on terms that are meaningful to the Native people and societies who have created and preserved them.⁷

Much of the cause for this disjuncture lies in the assumption found within the 1997 *Delgamuukw* decision that Native oral histories work in fundamentally the same way as Western history, and that these bodies of indigenous knowledge will therefore necessarily supplement and enrich an existing historiography and jurisprudence derived from what are largely archival-based understandings of past happenings. Raising the methodological and epistemological problems of this assumption is not to suggest that Western and Native forms of historical understanding are necessarily incompatible or set in incongruous opposition to one another. Nor should this concern be too

quickly associated with the sort of relativistic approach that sometimes leads to all historical narratives (Western and other) being disregarded as equally invalid portals for better understanding genuine past happenings. Rather, the fundamental dilemma seems to hinge on the issue that, as Native oral histories assume a greater presence in Canadian courts and politics, the narratives and the cultures they represent might find themselves increasingly abused in a manner not dissimilar to the way that victims of sexual crimes have often found themselves doubly violated by the courtroom cross-examination experience.⁸ If, for example, oral history is seen as contradicting or running contrary to evidence gleaned from documentary sources, how will the courts determine the relative validity of the two bodies of evidences? Already we are seeing that the judicial system considers those oral histories that lack documentary confirmation to be a subordinate order of information and interpretation. Perhaps more to the point, if, in litigation involving an inter-tribal dispute, two competing or contradictory Aboriginal oral histories are presented, will the courts be equipped to assess the contending narratives' relative validities by criteria that have indigenous import? The same question applies more broadly to historians as we encounter, interpret, and use Native oral history in various academic, political, and legal contexts.

This chapter makes no claim to having fully penetrated an indigenous epistemology. Rather, it is the product of sustained dialogues with both documents and people that aspires to set a foundation from which future analysis can be launched and future dialogues started. It is based upon more than a decade of intense social and professional interaction with Coast Salish people living along the lower Fraser River watershed in southwestern Canada. In order to better understand the way in which Central Coast Salish society functions within history, I begin by exploring the way that history functions within Central Coast Salish society. I use contact narratives as the primary vehicles for communicating this analysis. First, I provide a brief outline of the two types of Coast Salish historical knowledge (and an explanation as to why I feel the standard ethnographic descriptions dividing them into two separate bodies of information relating to two separate periods of history are inappropriate). Next, I engage in an analysis of the indigenous discourse over the importance of "keeping the stories right." What does this cultural mandate mean in terms of historical accuracy and legitimacy, and do such concepts transcend cultures and time? I conclude with a comparative look at the role of memory and "authorities" within the functioning of Coast Salish and Western history.



Among the Coast Salish, history is a serious matter. It continues to be used to validate social and political status, as well as personal and collective

identity. The upper class (which Wayne Suttles argues made up the majority of the population at first contact) is known in the Halq'eméylem language as *smela:lh* – literally “worthy people.” When asked to define the meaning of worthy people, fluent elders typically explain that it refers to “people who know their history.” Lower-class people, by way of contrast, are called *s'texem*, a term translated as “worthless people,” because they have “lost or forgotten their history.”⁹

Knowing one's history serves a number of important social, economic, and political functions. Ownership and regulatory rights to productive family fishing grounds or berry patches continue to be inherited today. Without detailed genealogical history linking a person to such sites, one would be “worthless” in a very real sense of the word. Likewise, leadership was largely hereditary and, either formally or informally, it largely remains so in many Coast Salish communities. In the distant past, certain men, who might best be thought of as “genealogy founders,”¹⁰ rose to prominence after performing great feats. Genealogical ties to these men, and memory of their heroic actions, are important components in succeeding generations of leaders' claims to their own prominence. In a similar manner, certain ritualists were trained to memorize (and occasionally supplement) the epic sacred stories of creation describing the establishment of order in what was a chaotic world. These people were especially valued because their vocational knowledge was considered to augment and reinforce the genealogical narratives relating to property and leadership, and because the stories they protected and transmitted were the basis of inter-tribal social and diplomatic relations. For example, indigenous historians discussing the important actions of the Transformers as they created the tribal ancestors of one community often refer to the important and necessary movements of those same characters to other regions for the acquisition of power or some other key resource.¹¹ Individual tribal histories, therefore, are inextricably linked together as chapters of a larger supra-tribal history that informs the collective consciousness of a much broader region and serves as the basis for the establishment of more formal socio-economic and political alliances.¹² Thus, in a way that is often difficult for outsiders to appreciate, the Coast Salish world remains anchored to a foundation of shared memory and historical understanding, constructed from overlapping and shared oral history and historiography.

In a society where history is regarded as the arbitrator of so many facets of identity and power, conflicts inevitably arise over matters of historical interpretation. The most intense and disruptive conflicts might be best thought of as history wars, that is, as clashes wherein one group challenges the historical legitimacy of another's historical claim to hereditary rights and prerogatives.¹³ For the Coast Salish, where, until recently, European-style literacy played no role in the transgenerational transmission of historical information and knowledge, historical validity remains intrinsically linked to

personal and collective family reputations. People are sources of history,¹⁴ and given this, few things are more important than an individual's reputation as a historical expert.



The Central Coast Salish method of constructing and conveying oral history, as well as the techniques used to determine historical legitimacy, is complex. As I understand it, the Coast Salish have two distinct categories of historical narratives: the first, called *sqwelqwel*, often translates as "true news"; stories from the second group are referred to as *sxwoxwiyam*, which are often interpreted as legends or "myth-age" stories. Typically, Western observers have regarded *sqwelqwel* as the more legitimate form of history based on memories of real events, and *sxwoxwiyam* as fictitious stories. Because outsiders generally consider *sqwelqwel* to be based on actual happenings, there is an assumption that they are more stable than *sxwoxwiyam*, that is, less prone to manipulation and change. Such distinctions, however, do not exist in the minds of the Coast Salish. Wayne Suttles has shown that both types of historical narratives are regarded as equally real, but what is less appreciated is the fact that the indigenous rules governing their usage impact their mutability, and that such matters are important to the indigenous people who depend on these narratives to interpret the past so as to make sense of the present.

A metaphor that perhaps approximates the indigenous understanding of the concepts of *sqwelqwel* and *sxwoxwiyam* history, and their relationship to one another, might be that of a single play unfolding simultaneously on two separate stages. On the first stage occurs the drama of the physical world with which most of us are familiar. On the second are depicted the actions of the *xa:xa* (sacred or taboo) realm of the spirit world. The spiritual actors on the second stage are able to observe the actions on the first, but the physical actors on the first generally cannot see the characters and happenings of the second. Actors from one stage can, and occasionally do, move through obscured passageways and enter the action on the other stage. Access points for beginning the journey from the physical stage to the spiritual stage are found at various *xa:xa* places located throughout the physical landscape, but only specially trained people can successfully negotiate the arduous and danger-fraught journey into the spirit world. Spirit actors, meanwhile, can and do enter the drama of humans, often emerging into the physical world through these same *xa:xa* portals. Their visits can be short or lengthy. The play's "author" and "director" is Scha-us, the "Great First," or Creator.¹⁵ However, he has revealed the drama's full script only to the spirit beings on the second stage, and so his directions are opaque to all

humans except the shamans who have made the journey to the spirit world. These ritualists may occasionally hear the Director's directions, but more often they learn of the Great First's intentions second hand from their associates in the spirit world.

Thus, Coast Salish history is one filled with significant points of interpenetration between the two dimensions of *sqwelqwel* and *sxwoxwiyam*. In the ancient past, the penetrations were so frequent as to make the two dramas essentially indistinguishable – the passageway separating the stages was often open and visible, so to speak. More recently, the drama occurring in the *sxwoxwiyam* spirit realm has played a slightly less prominent role in the ongoing drama of contemporary Coast Salish human history, or *sqwelqwel*.

Sqwelqwel represents a body of historical knowledge/memories that generally consists of information about past happenings to which the speaker has some direct connection. That is to say, *sqwelqwel* describes events that happened to a particular individual or to someone the conveyor of the information knew or knows. Among the most important *sqwelqwel* are those relating to family history. As mentioned, genealogy stories link the present generation to important figures from the past; as such, they are among the most valued of the *sqwelqwel* narratives. Recently, in discussing the integrity of historical genealogy narratives with two elderly fluent Halq'eméylem-speaking women, I was told that in the past there were people who were recognized as the keepers and communicators of all family histories. These people, typically but not exclusively men, were referred to as *sxá:sls*, which they translated as "he who keeps track of everything."¹⁶ The *sxá:sls*' task, as they understood it, was to "take care of everything our grandparents taught [showed] us."¹⁷ In the mid-1930s, a Coast Salish elder known as Old Pierre from the Katzie Tribe on the lower Fraser River explained that prior to the assertion of non-Native legal hegemony, whenever a dispute arose as to the proper form and content of such a historical narrative, it became necessary to "summon two old men who belonged to different villages, but were both well versed in local histories" to discuss and reconcile the differing historical interpretations.¹⁸ Severe variances in historical interpretation, Old Pierre maintained, required the defender of a particular version of history to enlist two additional "lawyers" to plead his case, after which, as the anthropologist Diamond Jenness recorded, the adjudicating "old men retired to consult in private. Whatever decision they reached was final."¹⁹

Sqwelqwel stories are not exclusively about genealogy. They can range from the common to the spectacular. A discussion of where one was last night and what one ate for dinner is just as much a part of the *sqwelqwel* discourse as a riveting account of how someone once killed a grizzly bear using only a small sharpened bone as a weapon.

In instances where the historical action within a *sqwelqwel* does not directly involve the story's teller, it is expected that a connection with the events and the speaker will be created through a process perhaps best thought of as "oral footnoting." That is to say, the audience will expect speakers or tellers to explain how they know what they know. Someone relating a *sqwelqwel* about an incident that occurred a century ago, for example, might preface the narrative by saying something like, "This story is about my great-grandfather. I was told this story by my grandmother, who did not see the actual events but learned of them from her father's brother (my great-grand-uncle), who was with my great-grandfather when it happened." The validity of such stories is not necessarily assessed against criteria of extant evidence. Nor is the question of "probability" (as generally defined by mainstream Canadian society, i.e., not supernatural) generally considered important. Rather, validity is primarily determined according to the status of the teller in relation to the listener and the various individuals (historical conveyors and actors) identified through the oral footnoting process. Thus, a particularly detailed and horrifying story one elderly woman shared describing how her great-aunt had been kidnapped, raped, and impregnated by a *sasquatch*²⁰ from which she had ultimately escaped was believed to be an accurate account of real happenings by all the listeners I spoke with afterwards. It was perceived thus not only because sasquatches are thought to be real,²¹ but because the speaker and her family were highly regarded. They were well trained, they knew not to lie: as the other people realized, this family understood that its cherished status would drop should it ever be caught lying. Cognizant of this, the elder was trusted to speak truthfully in order to maintain her family's social standing.

This, however, is not to say that *sqwelqwel* are immutable. According to Coast Salish people, the decision to enrich a *sqwelqwel* so as to make it entertaining is not incorrect. Nor is it the sole prerogative of the speaker to decide when a *sqwelqwel* will be enhanced. This is not to say that the accuracy of a story is simply a function of the social situation in which the speaker finds him- or herself (*sqwelqwel* are not simply responses to the perceived needs of an audience or listeners). Rather, many Coast Salish consider that on certain (possibly most or all) occasions, *sqwelqwel* are composed and shared not only with the intention of telling people how things happened or what happened, but also to create special spiritual contexts. Emotions are generally regarded as being directed or guided by omnipresent ancestral spirits. People are happy because the ancestors want them to be happy. People are sad because the ancestors want them to be sad (that is, to mourn, or to grieve, or to solemnly contemplate). People who act in accordance with ancestral guidance can generally expect to live healthy and fulfilling lives. Elders often refer to those who do not as examples of

people whose troubled lives and inner turmoil are the products of a dislocation from their ancestors' spirits.

Thus, exaggeration and intentional manipulation of sqwelqwel can and does occur, even by high-status speakers. Although status and careful oral footnotes help establish a speaker's integrity, and therefore the perceived validity of a narrative, what appears to be of vital importance is the intent behind the speaker's utterances. Is the relating of particular past happenings designed primarily to convey historical fact (or a particular lesson), or is it intended more to communicate some other kind of message? Is the history meant to be humorous, and if so, is the humour more important than the facts? Funny stories are not infrequently exaggerated (perhaps it would be more accurate to say that certain aspects of particular stories are emphasized and then enriched) for the purpose of making them funnier. Listeners generally understand and even expect that such narratives are being somewhat manipulated to create and communicate humour, and therefore to create a happy social and spiritual atmosphere. This most typically occurs when the original action was considered devoid of humour as it was occurring, but in hindsight became funny. For example, one Coast Salish man shared a sqwelqwel that had all of his extended family and guests at a dinner gathering literally shedding tears of laughter. He recounted how one night, while returning from an evening of somewhat excessive socializing at a local pub, he was surprised by the sudden appearance of a deer's reflective eyes in his car's headlights. "Luckily for me I'd been drinking, and so I was only driving about 20 miles an hour," the speaker chuckled as he introduced his sqwelqwel:

I slammed on the brakes and screeched to a halt about fifteen feet from the deer [everyone at the table begins to laugh because they know car tires don't screech at twenty miles per hour]. That deer just stood there frozen in the headlights. I thought to myself, "Now here's a situation. A deer just sitting there and me without my rifle." Well, what could I do? I got out of the car and walked toward the deer. It just stood there – stupid like [speaker imitates the look on the deer's face]. I looked toward the side of the road and there was a good-sized rock [gestures to indicate a rock about the size of a softball]. I picked it up and walked up to that deer, and WHAM! I hit it up side of the head. Well, you should've seen it jump. You should've seen *me* jump! But I grabbed hold of that big deer and took another swing with the rock. But that deer was tough. He started dragging me away, so I swung again. [At this point the speaker has jumped up from his chair and is moving about the room in very animated fashion, alternating between his actions and those of the deer. People at the table are laughing extremely hard and wiping away tears.] Finally, the deer stopped moving. I had done *it!* I'd

hunted a deer without a rifle – just like a real Indian, eh? But I still had a problem. I didn't have a rope to tie the deer down [on the hood of my car]. But I had to get that deer home right then. If I didn't, some white guy might come along. Then there'd be trouble, eh? [Speaker pauses and people at table stop laughing to ponder this important point.] If a white guy came along he'd probably take credit for killing that deer with a rock himself and take the deer home to *his* wife! [Everybody bursts out laughing at the irony.] So I hoisted that deer up on the hood of my car and started driving. Slowly, slowly, slowly along that old bumpy pot-holed road. Then, I guess one of those potholes woke the deer up! He wasn't dead, he was just knocked out! He slid off the hood of my car and started staggering around the road so I jumped out to get him [speaker again emulates the wobbly deer's actions, and then his own unsteady movements]. I found another rock and I gave that deer a *real* good hit. He was dead this time for sure. So I hoisted him back on the hood and started off again. When I got home I told everybody [all extended family living in the immediate area] to come out and see my deer: "I've been huntin' with a rock," I said. They wouldn't believe me. But when they checked that deer over they couldn't find no bullet holes *and* no crushed bones like there would be if I'd hit him with my car. No sir, I killed him with a rock. I killed him with a rock twice!²²

After he finished speaking, and while all of us sitting around the big kitchen table were still laughing, the speaker's brother-in-law looked at him incredulously, smiled, and asked if the story was true. "Course, it is," he replied with a smile, then added, "Would an Indian lie when a white man's listening?" At this point he looked directly toward me, the only "white man" at the table. "You sure would," his sister interrupted with an accusing tone – after which there was a long awkward pause as the room grew silent before she added with a smile, "You never owned a car. You had a truck!" Everybody laughed again.

Interactive historical accounts like this illustrate not only the function of fiction within true stories, but also the manner in which our presence as outsiders affects what is being told and how it is being told. They challenge us to consider seriously our roles in both the ethnographic and the historiographic processes. Viewed in this light, contact was not only a moment that occurred when representatives of an Aboriginal society first met a representative of a non-Native community, but a series of moments that occurs repeatedly, and yet somewhat distinctively, each time people speak across cultures.

Of course, spirits are not exclusively, or even primarily, interested in guiding historical discourse simply in order to establish mood and social context. Ancestral spirits are also considered to be regularly listening to (that is, monitoring) the actions, thoughts, and spoken expressions of the living –

especially if acted, thought, or spoken in front of open fires after dark.²³ People are particularly careful not to dishonour their ancestors by lying, for ancestors may take reprisals for actions or words that disgrace them. In order to avoid creating even the perception in the minds of the ancestors that someone might be speaking of the past in an inappropriate manner, many contemporary elders still avoid speaking of the recently deceased, or even uttering their names, after dusk, except in appropriate spiritual and ceremonial contexts. Improper historical utterances might be inadvertently interpreted by ancestral spirits as beckoning; “called” spirits who are not properly greeted have a tendency to become confused – a condition that creates an imbalance in the spirit world. Confused ancestral spirits frequently assume that they were summoned because one of the living is suffering or lonely, and so, with the best of intentions, the ancestor might take away the person’s soul to comfort it in the spirit realm – a condition which, if left untreated by a shaman, is fatal. Concern for such matters is, at least rhetorically, especially strong among the hereditary “upper class,” who, as Suttles has documented and my own fieldwork confirms, claim to have more extensive training and knowledge of metaphysical matters.²⁴



Not all alterations of historical speech are for effect or the result of carelessness. Despite taboos, people will occasionally exaggerate or even fabricate elements of a *sqwelqwel*. Although lying is generally regarded as an expression of people’s improper attempts to enhance their status, and therefore beyond what ancestral spirits would endorse, it nonetheless occurs – and not only for those reasons. One relatively recent and illustrative example of this involves a man whom I shall call John Doe.

I first spoke with John Doe in 1992 while working on an eight-month contract with the Stó:lō Tribal Council. I had been asked to conduct archival and oral history research into the question of “traditional Coast Salish leadership.” My academic training had been principally in archive-based history. Interestingly, as I later learned, though I considered my inexperience in anthropology and oral history a serious deficit in my skill set, it was, in large part, what initially made me attractive to the Tribal Council leadership. Justice Allan McEachern had recently delivered his ill-conceived and now infamous *Delgamuukw* decision in which he rejected oral history and the evidence of anthropologists in favour of what he deemed the superiority of historical insight gleaned from documentary evidence. Of course, McEachern’s interpretation of archival documents as objective voices from the past which spoke for themselves, and of historians as readers who simply pluck quotes, was, as Robin Fisher pointed out, an example of the sort of historical enquiry that Collingwood had earlier dismissed as “scissors

and paste" history.²⁵ Nonetheless, it apparently was at least partly responsible for briefly transforming people with history graduate degrees into hot commodities: "We were told [by the courts] that historians are what we need to win land claims court cases," the Tribal Council's executive director of Aboriginal rights and title later explained to me, "and so we decided we'd hire an historian."

During the course of my research, I ultimately conducted repeat interviews with thirty-one people who had been identified for me as knowledgeable elders and cultural experts. Through their generosity and patience, I came to appreciate and expect that elders' oral traditions would not necessarily contain the elements historians used to assess the legitimacy of Western archives-based histories. Rather than referring to specific first-hand historical observations or records (something impossible in oral histories discussing events beyond the personal memories of the present generation), the Salish elders emphasized their relationships to both the historical actors and the various sources (earlier generations of "tellers"). Thus, in those stories that were not simply the recounting of events within the teller's own life, elders often validated their narratives by referencing the person from whom they had heard the story, and, where possible, with additional references to the antecedents of that source ("I heard this story from my great-uncle, who heard it from his uncle – who was my great-great-grandfather").

On other occasions, when the links between the various generations of sources were perhaps not as well known to the teller, elders were generally careful to provide contextual information about the central figure discussed within the historical narrative, such as his or her relatives, family status, and other notable facts. In either case, the elders were providing what might best be thought of as "oral footnotes" – references that in highlighting the link between themselves and the historical actors, and/or the various intergenerational transmitters of the story, served to sustain and enhance the status of both. In this way, the validity of the historical action/actor was linked to, and in part a product of, the status of the conveyors of the historical information, and vice versa.

Although he was not originally on the list provided by Tribal Council officials, one of the organization's employees suggested that I interview John Doe. Apparently, he professed to have much knowledge about traditional leadership. Upon further enquiry, I learned that John Doe perhaps possessed a great deal of historical knowledge on a range of topics. But when I asked some of the elders I had already interviewed for their opinion, I learned that more than a few people regarded him and his historical information with suspicion. My enquiries were greeted with responses ranging from conspiratorial smiles and short answers such as "Ah, don't listen to him; he tells strange stories; nobody really believes him" to faintly veiled anger:

“He’s a damn liar, I don’t know why he makes those things up. It only hurts us all.”

In the late 1980s, I was told, John Doe had begun to assert that he had important historical information which was unknown to others. On many occasions, and to a host of different people, he allegedly claimed, among other things, that he was able to trace his genealogy back twelve generations (most Coast Salish, I learned, generally consider knowledge of seven or eight generations to be the maximum extent of pertinent genealogical information, and so this seemed both remarkable and unprecedented).²⁶ He also claimed that he knew of a Spanish fort that had been established near Yale in the lower Fraser Canyon in the late eighteenth century (a generation before the 1808 arrival of Simon Fraser, thought to be the first European to visit that region). John Doe also allegedly contended that he had visited, and therefore knew the location of, several archaeological sites that contained astounding and unparalleled finds. One of these was a hermetically sealed clay-lined “pithouse” that had been abandoned centuries earlier, but which was still in perfect condition and filled with wonderfully preserved artifacts. Another was a deep vertical cave on a mountaintop that he alleged was the birthplace and home of *Xá:ls*, the Transformer, and into which John Doe supposedly claimed to have been lowered two hundred feet on a rope.

Although certain people looked upon John Doe’s claims to privileged historical and cultural information with suspicion and even disdain, not everyone did. Among a different segment of the local Aboriginal population, John Doe was increasingly regarded as having been selected by the ancestors as a special carrier and conduit of historical information. As such, he was acquiring a reputation as both a cultural leader and historian. Moreover, even people not associated with him were pointing out that if his information was true it might be of assistance in advancing Aboriginal rights and title. The existence of such remarkable archaeological sites in such remote locations, for example, could be used to support the Aboriginal claim to the land and its resources by showing that the current population’s ancestors had made use of the resources in a wide territory. The Spanish fort was of particular interest. The Tribal Council’s director of fisheries, its cultural researcher, and its land claims lawyer individually approached me to enquire whether the story of the fort might be true. If the Spanish had established themselves on the mainland of British Columbia, they reasoned, there might be supportive archival documents. Such documents, if they existed, might describe “traditional” Coast Salish activities that could be used to reinforce arguments for recognition of certain Aboriginal rights – in particular the right to the commercial sale of salmon.

I expressed my reservations, explaining that there was no reference to a Spanish fort on the BC mainland in any of the historical literature with

which I was familiar. Even so, I agreed to look into the matter, first by talking directly with John Doe and then enquiring among other elders and cultural experts to see if his account of the Spanish fort could be corroborated, or, alternatively, explained in other terms. Negative evidence (in this case the absence of archival documents) would not justify concluding that something had not existed or happened, especially if an oral tradition maintained that it had.

When I first met with John Doe, he explained that he preferred not to discuss the matter of traditional leadership with a non-Native outsider, but he agreed to speak with me on a host of historical topics, including the pithouse, the Transformer's cave, and the Spanish fort. Respecting his wishes, I confined my questions to these topics. During our conversation, however, he made it clear that he would not reveal the details about how to find the pithouse or cave; nor would he divulge to anyone how he came to learn about the Spanish fort.

In my follow-up conversations with other elders, I was unable to identify anyone with information about a pre-Simon Fraser Spanish fort. It became apparent that many viewed John Doe not as blessed with special powers of perception and knowledge, but rather as a weaver of creative works of fiction. One person criticized him as someone who had too little training in historical and cultural matters to have legitimately learned such detailed information. Another hinted that the inadequacies (low-status ancestry) of John Doe's character made it unlikely that the spirits would have favoured him with the gift of such knowledge. Still another dismissed the Spanish fort account as untrue, not because he knew the fort did not exist, but rather because he was familiar with other of John Doe's historical narratives (those relating to cultural matters), which he claimed to "know" were false, and so dismissed the fort story as well. Indeed, what appeared of most concern to everyone who criticized John Doe was his rising popularity. How and why, they wondered, could other Aboriginal people not recognize that his descriptions of cultural history were liberally peppered with creative embellishments? And they worried that perhaps this lack of recognition was yet another indication of culture loss; perhaps people were losing the traditional skills needed to determine what was real and what was false – what was good history and what was not.

Significantly, for the purpose of comparison with Western historical methods, the various indigenous critiques of John Doe's history did not necessarily involve the checking of evidence. Initially, at least, none of his Coast Salish critics seems to have asked him to share his twelve-generation genealogy, to provide details about the Spanish fort (such as where it was located and when it was established), or to take people to the archaeological sites and cave. Instead, they generally asked, "Well, who did he get that stuff [information] from? I never heard that before. Who told him that?"

John Doe's evidence was deemed unreliable not because he had failed to produce the physical evidence, but because he had consistently failed to use adequate oral footnotes to validate the manner in which he had acquired his knowledge. In other words, he was being discredited because he failed to trace his knowledge through recognized experts or authorities, and in this was proving himself "unworthy" in some eyes. As one widely respected elder observed, "A 'good person' would tell us how he knows that stuff; who told it to him."²⁷

A few years later, in the mid-1990s, John Doe began adding information to his historical narratives. Earlier, he had refused to provide details, arguing that he had been entrusted to protect the history. Ordinarily, among the Coast Salish, such an argument carried a great deal of weight. Aspects of knowledge, especially spiritual and historical knowledge, are widely considered "private." To publicly share such information so that others may use (or misuse) it is to weaken its import, and by extension to lower the teller's status.²⁸

And yet, in this case, perhaps John Doe felt that he could silence his critics only by verifying the authority behind his evidence, even if this meant revealing all of it. Accordingly, and to many people's surprise (for they had assumed the information was orally transmitted to him), he explained that his knowledge was in large part derived from archival documents he had read in the 1970s at the Aboriginal Resource Centre's archives. It was in the archives, John Doe revealed, that he had read a 1894 publication by Franz Boas, in which the prominent North American anthropologist had recorded a detailed Coast Salish genealogy.²⁹ John Doe apparently had added the four succeeding generations of information to Boas' existing list, thereby establishing the link to himself. This was certainly an example of accurate research and a legitimate and valid act, but he was criticized for treating the published material as though it were his own private preserve, even keeping it from members of his extended family. A non-Native employee at the resource centre had also allegedly been with John Doe when he visited the archaeological sites. In fact, Doe asserted that this employee had lowered him on the rope into the deep cavern. Additionally, the story of the eighteenth-century Spanish fort had also originated with the archives, for it was there, John Doe revealed, that he had obtained old documents proving the fort's existence.

Although these facts briefly aided John Doe, ultimately, they could not withstand the persistent public scrutiny. When one elder slyly pointed out that, as far as she could remember, the resource-centre employee was not physically capable of making the strenuous hike to the remote mountaintop cave, let alone lowering a man of John Doe's robust stature two hundred feet into a crevice and then pulling him out again, the newly acquired shine faded from John Doe's sqwelqwel. By noting the flaws in the cave story,

people were implying that John Doe probably told untruths about the other information as well. Over time, even a few of his former supporters joined those who did not take his stories seriously, perhaps for the simple reason that his failure to meet the indigenous criteria for legitimacy subsequently called into question the worthiness of his facts on all subjects.



Although John Doe's sqwelqwel was ultimately deemed illegitimate and therefore unimportant to most Coast Salish people, readers might be interested in further information regarding the Spanish fort. The fact that, in the early-to-mid 1990s, he had spoken of the fort's existence with a number of graduate students, some of whom recorded the story as a Coast Salish oral history, makes this perhaps all the more relevant. Indeed, this was a major concern of some of the political leaders and elders who knew of John Doe's discussions with the students: "Did the non-Native students believe him?" Although they hoped not, they also worried that if the students *disbelieved* him, they might, by association, dismiss all Aboriginal oral history as false or made up. Moreover, an examination of the place of John Doe's historiography in connection with the Spanish fort provides a convenient segue into a treatment of other sqwelqwel pertaining to the contact era, which in turn provide an entrée into discussions of the functioning of the second genre of Coast Salish historical knowledge – *sxwoxwiyam*.

Although John Doe never showed me the copied documents he allegedly received from the archives, I suspect, having reviewed the Aboriginal Resource Centre's archival cartographic holdings, that he based his Spanish fort assertion on a reading of nineteenth-century maps. In 1814, David Thompson produced a map of the northwest coast and Columbia Plateau for the North West Company.³⁰ Much of this map was based on Thompson's own first-hand observations, but the portion depicting the stretch of the Fraser River between its junction with the Thompson River and the Pacific Ocean is derived solely from Thompson's reading of Simon Fraser's 1808 journals. On this portion of the map in bold print is a notation reading, "To this Place the White Men have come from the Sea." Additionally, on a number of maps produced in the 1850s, the word "cañon" appears adjacent to the river near present-day Yale.³¹ One can imagine how, collectively, such evidence could be taken to infer that the Spanish had come from the sea to establish a garrison. "Cañon," however, is not (as one could be forgiven for assuming) a reference to military cannons, but the Spanish word for "canyon." It depicts the point on the river where an adventurer from the sea could expect to encounter cataracts and rapids, indicating the entrance to the Fraser Canyon. Thompson's reference to white men from the sea is likewise apparently derived from his reading of Fraser's journal. The Scots

explorer noted that, upon arriving at a village near present-day Yale, he and his men were escorted to the shore near Lady Franklin Rock and there "informed ... that white people like us came there from below." Fraser recorded that he was then "showed indented marks which the white people made upon the rocks" (marks Fraser dismissed as "natural").³²

It is interesting that Fraser and his men were brought to this spot and told the story of the "scratch marks." Today, local Coast Salish historians still bring visitors there to explain how the marks were made by Xá:ls (one of three bear brothers and their sister who collectively are referred to as Xexá:ls, or, in English, as the Transformers). Together and independently, the Transformers had incredible powers of alteration that enabled them to change people into objects. The world takes its present form largely because of the actions of the Transformers. One of the best-known transformer stories recounts how Xá:ls made the scratch marks near Lady Franklin Rock while engaged in a battle with an "evil Indian doctor" who was sitting on the opposite shore of the river. Each time Xá:ls "used his power against the Indian doctor he grit his teeth and scratched a mark into the rocks with his fingernails."³³ The competition continued for some time until Xá:ls eventually transformed the evil doctor into stone. Xá:ls is believed to have left the marks on the rock as a lasting legacy of his work.³⁴ These "transformer sites," as they are popularly called, are located throughout the Coast Salish landscape and serve as sacred mnemonic devices as well as spiritually potent places where properly trained shamans can acquire sacred historical information.

A few entries earlier in Fraser's journal is a telling reference to his understanding that the "the respect and attention, which we generally experience, proceed, perhaps, from an idea that we are superior beings, who are not to be overcome."³⁵ Wendy Wickwire has recently demonstrated that Simon Fraser was not incorrect in this assumption: the oral history of the Interior Salish living immediately upriver from the scratch marks demonstrates that people initially thought Fraser to be the returning Transformer.³⁶

For the Coast Salish, this interpretation is corroborated most clearly in the oral history recorded ca. 1894 by C.F. Newcombe, a collector who was travelling through the region purchasing Indian "curios" for various North American museums. Newcombe met with Chief Pierre Ayessick of Hope and asked him to share any stories he knew regarding the arrival of Simon Fraser in his community. The following is my transcription of Newcombe's scribbled recording of Ayessick's "first contact" sqwelqwel:

A long time ago when tribes had left winter villages to go to Yale for summer for salmon, news came from above from Big Canyon that men of different race were coming. The people were troubled.

It was thought that they must be people spoken of in the old stories. They were getting scared. They thought that because they were the people

spoken of in the old stories by their grandparents when they appeared they would help the good people and be their friends, but if bad the[y] would turn them into stone, or animals or birds.

A meeting of all the people came together and it was decided to try to please the newcomers and they all, men women and children ... [bathed?] in the river and painted their ... [faces and] their bodies with red berries as paint (*soqnat*), which grows at the base of fir trees.

Then the chief sent messengers to ... [meet?] the strangers at Big Canyon and to invite them to come down. They walked along the river trail over the rocks. They found them camping with a number of boxes of ... [?] which were thought to hold small-pox or miracle medicines. The visitors came on at once, the Indians helping them by packing boxes etc. along the trail. When the party got to Yale all the people were crowded the ... [better?] to receive them and gave them ... [?] and all kinds of food. When the Yale people saw them they remembered that some time before a visitor to them from the Columbia river country had described the way of the white people ... [?] and they then found that they were the same, ... [?] and ... [?] they were easy in their mind.

Hope's grandfather, the head chief, lent a canoe and the chief lent a second one. These were then of great value because they used to ... [?] of slave and ... [?].³⁷

Ayessick clearly appears to frame the story of Fraser's arrival within the context of the sacred narratives of *Xexá:ls*, the Transformers (the "people spoken of in the old stories"). His narrative represents a *sqwelqwel* about what was believed to be a *sxwoxwiyam*. Likewise, the Reverend Thomas Crosby, the first Methodist missionary to establish himself along the lower Fraser River and apparently the first European to become genuinely fluent in the local Halq'eméylem language, noted that according to the Coast Salish people he spoke with in the 1860s, Simon Fraser was initially regarded as the "pure white child of the sun." Aboriginal leaders allegedly carried Fraser "on their backs and set him down on mats in places of honour." And after his departure, the local Coast Salish were remembered as having "danced to the sun-god for days in token of their appreciation of the visit of his son."³⁸

Thus, in deciphering Thompson's map, John Doe appears to have fallen into the same trap as Thompson did in his reading of Fraser; he accepted the text at face value and overlooked the possibility that his ancestors probably interpreted the first non-Natives they met within their own epistemological framework. Fraser and his men not only looked different physically, but they dressed oddly and were in possession of technology that could not be readily explained with reference to existing indigenous experiences. Confronted with this new situation, the Coast Salish did what anybody would

do under similar circumstances: they tried to fit the newcomers into their existing historical understandings. Coast Salish people knew that Xá:ls, the Transformer, had been different; he had special powers; he had travelled up the Fraser River after appearing from the ocean below; and he later ascended to the sky and journeyed with the sun after he reached the eastern sunrise.³⁹ Although subsequent colonial incursions led the Stó:lō to revise and abandon what might be thought of as their initial “European equals Transformer” thesis, it seems clear that at least initially they regarded Fraser and his crew as the returning Xexá:ls.⁴⁰

Ultimately, it seems, there was no Spanish fort, but beneath the text on the nineteenth-century maps and within the interpretation provided by John Doe as subsequently critiqued by members of his community, there resided not only a fascinating account of a first encounter, but also cultural clues that provide glimpses into the way in which Coast Salish historical *sqwelqwel* knowledge functions. Both indigenous and Western historical techniques ultimately came to the same conclusion about the validity and utility of John Doe’s historical information and interpretation by using their own separate criteria. Certainly, the Coast Salish did not need an outside academic to tell them whether the history was correct. The risk is that outsiders (and here I’m referring particularly to the courts) who are not familiar with the indigenous mechanisms for assessing legitimacy might apply Western methods only to dismiss John Doe’s narrative and, by extension, end up dismissing or discrediting the broader community and society that he appeared to represent.



The second type of historical narrative, as mentioned above, is called *sxwoxwiyam*. As noted, *sxwoxwiyam* are typically set in an age when the world had not yet been put in its permanent form, when people and animals could speak to one another, and when dangerous “Indian doctors” with powers of transformation dominated the social and physical landscape. Into this world dropped the *tel swayel* (sky-people) who become the “first people” of various tribal communities. Other people already existed, but the world was too chaotic for them to be considered the founders of contemporary communities. The sky-people began the process of fixing the world into its current stable form, but they did not finish the job. The world was next visited by Xexá:ls, the Transformer siblings who travelled through the world completing the work begun by the sky-people: dispensing with bad Indian doctors (although their work was sometimes morally ambiguous), creating other “first people” for additional tribal groups, bestowing special technical or ritual knowledge, and generally “making the world right.”

Early Western observers and ethnographers have classified sxwoxwiyam histories variously as “legends,” “folktales,” and “myths.” Such terms, though perhaps useful initial efforts at creating metaphors of cross-cultural understanding, unfortunately served to convey the impression that the narratives were fictitious accounts akin, perhaps, to contemporary Western society’s conception of Greek mythology or European fairy tales (that is to say, stories of fantasy without anchor in historical reality or personal memory).

More recently, Wayne Suttles has chosen to refer to sxwoxwiyam as “myth-age” stories, a definition that more clearly situates them as a genre of knowledge through which Coast Salish existence in, and relationships with, the world are explained historically.⁴¹ However, this definition too, it seems, has served to overly reinforce the impression that sxwoxwiyam exclusively describe the distant past – the age when the Transformers lived and acted – as opposed to a time when people believed that the transformer stories were true historical accounts. This distinction is significant, for though Suttles (like Jan Vansina⁴² and Julie Cruikshank,⁴³ among other sensitive scholars) went to great length to emphasize that many contemporary Coast Salish continue to believe in the validity or reality of sxwoxwiyam, he nonetheless presented these narratives as though indigenous people thought of them as about a distant by-gone era. In this regard, the metaphor implied is that sxwoxwiyam are to Coast Salish people perhaps what Old Testament stories are to contemporary practising Christians – largely true, if fantastic, accounts of real events from a distant and different time when God played a much more active role in human affairs – that is, stories of past miraculous events that are unlikely to happen today. Perhaps a more indigenous understanding might be reflected in saying that sxwoxwiyam are to contemporary Coast Salish people what New Testament stories appear to have been to early Christians living in the generations immediately following Christ’s crucifixion: miraculous and true stories that occurred not only in the distant past, but recently, and which might occur again today or tomorrow. In this regard, they might be better thought of as sacred histories *rather* than myth-age accounts.

Among the Coast Salish, and especially among the social and spiritual elite, great emphasis is placed on “keeping the sxwoxwiyam stories right,” in unaltered form. Indeed, contrary to popular non-Native impressions, the obligation to retain integrity in sxwoxwiyam is greater than that associated with sqwelqwel. Today, Stó:lō people who incorrectly tell a sacred history are seldom publicly sanctioned, but, as mentioned, they are still often spoken of behind their backs as “low class.” In addition, they are typically referred to as “people who don’t know right from wrong,” or, and perhaps more tellingly, as too influenced by white society. As one respected authority on cultural protocols recently explained, “Some of our own people today think our Transformer and origin stories are like fairy tales; things

you can make up or change. Well, they aren't. It's not right to tell school teachers to encourage students to 'make up' legends about coyote, or mink, or black bear. Today, people are forgetting this. This seems to be especially the case with some of our people who have gone off to university and gotten degrees."⁴⁴

But there is more than ridicule at stake with regard to maintaining the integrity of *sxwoxwiyam*. Indicative are the protocols and sanctions Sally Snyder observed and recorded in 1963, even among her supposedly "acculturated" Coast Salish informants, people she described as being "compulsive about telling stories 'right.'" As Snyder discovered, "If a story was imperfectly recalled it was wrong for ... [people] to 'guess,' meaning to pad, improvise, paraphrase or omit. It was better not to tell it at all for it was dangerous to omit scenes and to shorten myths. Nubile women in the audience might then give birth to deformed children, incomplete or malformed like the abbreviated or truncated story. And shortening of myths would shorten the lives of all listeners."⁴⁵

The rigid protocols for ensuring accuracy and preventing the altering of a sacred historical narrative should not be too quickly equated with a prohibition on certain people either acquiring new (or remembering forgotten) information to supplement existing narratives, or creating entirely new sacred historical narratives. Although Salish people could neither guess nor improvise content and meaning, nor edit or shorten a sacred historical narrative, without risking community sanction for endangering their audience, evidence suggests that *sxwoxwiyam* could (and can), under certain circumstances, be supplemented. That is to say, the "right people" can acquire certain types of sacred historical knowledge by visiting special sites where they access the metaphysical tunnels that lead to special locations in the spirit world where knowledge and information can be "remembered." Typically, such acquisitions are associated with what are popularly, and somewhat problematically, referred to as "vision quests." Katzie elder Old Pierre acquired such information in 1936 for the anthropologist Diamond Jenness when, during the course of an interview, he could not remember certain important material. He retrieved it the following morning by sending his spirit to the site of a large boulder known to possess historical knowledge. The spirit forces associated with the rock then provided the elder with the information he required.⁴⁶

Moreover, and again only under special circumstances, it appears possible that entirely new sacred histories can be added to the indigenous canon or historiography. Like Christian biblical texts, *sxwoxwiyam* cannot be altered, but whereas the elite of the Christian Church have concluded that additional "books" cannot be added to the New Testament (no doubt much to the chagrin of individuals such as Metis leader Louis Riel and Mormon founder Joseph Smith), properly trained and sufficiently respected Stó:lō

spiritual leaders can, under special circumstances, add to the body of sacred oral histories. In this context, it is probably important to restate that such narratives are not exclusively about the distant past. Rather, they are a distinct set of historical discourses, and some of the information they convey pertains to the very recent past, potentially as recent as a few moments ago.

The following incidents illustrate the nature of a particular form of Salish historical memory. On separate occasions two elderly Coast Salish men shared information with me about aspects of their "contact-era" history. Each insisted that he had acquired it through means that might appear rather unconventional to a Western historian: in nightly dream sessions, certain ancestors had provided them with information that the spirit world wanted to ensure was not "forgotten," and which would be made available to their community through both their voices and my writings. In one instance, the elder shared information concerning traditional leadership in a series of well-organized lecture-like discussions that he delivered over the course of a number of weeks. Not only had he more detailed knowledge on the subject than any of the other thirty-one people I interviewed, but his information also corresponded to a remarkable degree with that in early unpublished non-Native historical and ethnographic observations and obscure anthropological publications. Ultimately, although I looked for alternatives, I could find no way to account for his historical knowledge except on his terms – a fact that obviously amused him; by then a close friend, he actually encouraged me to look for alternative sources for his knowledge "if it would make me feel better."⁴⁷

How then does Coast Salish history function? Is it incompatible with Western ways of knowing about the past? Among R.G. Collingwood's many insightful contributions is his insistence that unverifiable statements by "authorities" cannot be history, and that therefore, "an historian [who] accepts the testimony of an authority and treats it as historical truth [in the absence of verifiable evidence] ... obviously forfeits the name of historian."⁴⁸ Additionally, in Collingwood's opinion, memory is not, and cannot be, history, "because history is a kind of organized or inferential knowledge, and memory is not organized, not inferential."⁴⁹

Collingwood's categorization of authorities and memory could be taken to disqualify Aboriginal oral history as a less valid window on the past. Neither authorities nor memory, however, are necessarily only as Collingwood describes them. Even in the Western world, reliance on memory has been equated with an absence of creative genius only within the last few hundred years. In a recent and thoughtful study, Mary Carruthers has demonstrated that medieval European society equated memory with intelligence and creativity. Although contemporary geniuses are said to possess "creative imagination [Collingwood's 'referential knowledge'] which they express

in intricate reasoning and original discovery, in earlier times geniuses were said to have richly retentive memories, which they expressed in intricate reasoning and original discovery." Thomas Aquinas, for example, was reported to have dictated to three secretaries on three different subjects simultaneously, not because he was necessarily smarter than other people (though no one would deny Aquinas' intelligence), but "because he had organized his thoughts and committed them to memory before hand."⁵⁰

In cultural situations where primary documents cannot be reviewed, as in an oral or memory-focused society, the ideas informing what constitutes legitimate history may be rather different, but not necessarily less valid, than those in contemporary Western society. Members of such communities typically rely upon authorities rather than reference to evidence as sources of both historical information *and* historical knowledge – not necessarily the same thing. Such authorities were/are not mere receptacles of unprocessed historical data, as Collingwood posits; instead, they might best be thought of as the non-literate equivalent of an archives and historian combined into a single being. Communities dependent on memory for the processing and transmission of knowledge, such as those of medieval Europe or contact-era North America, therefore, developed elaborate mnemonic techniques to allow complex information to be preserved across time in unaltered form so it could be recited and interpreted for members of contemporary society in a manner that was meaningful. They also developed sophisticated, if mysterious, means of acquiring lost or forgotten information about the past – information that not only supported earlier narratives, but also aided in interpreting them. These techniques allowed specially trained individuals to retrieve and retain vast amounts of material. Other techniques allowed these same people as well as untrained members of their communities to discern good information about the past from bad. Exploring how such matters functioned can provide us with important insights into indigenous ways of remembering and knowing.

Viewed in this light, the onus placed on an indigenous keeper of history to "keep the stories right" is all the more impressive. For one thing, it dwarfs the academic checks and balances placed on a contemporary Western scholar, not only in terms of the obligation to keep track of information, but, more importantly, in terms of relating material in a fashion that will meet changing societal needs, while at the same time ensuring that its factual components are not compromised. Consider, by contrast, the repercussions visited on a Western academic who fails to maintain the integrity of his or her historical narratives. Mild sanction might include the diminishment of reputation. Within the legal context, the historian's expert-witness testimony might be deemed, at best, unreliable, at worst, perjury. Should the fraud remain undetected, the historian must at least live with the knowledge

that he or she is partly responsible for a court decision that punished the innocent and let the guilty go free. On a wider scale, the historian's compromised information and analysis will mislead those people who use them to design contemporary actions. Coast Salish people listening to a historical narrative, on the other hand, face real dangers should the speaker compromise its integrity. It is not just the speaker's honour (and that of his or her family) that is at stake, but the physical well-being of the listening community. A more dialogic form of historical communication is difficult to envision.

Can Canadian courts and Western historians ever truly appreciate indigenous history on genuinely indigenous terms? Probably not. As the contact narratives from two centuries ago illustrate, the epistemological gulfs between natives and newcomers are formidable. But perhaps this is acceptable so long as it is recognized that other ways of knowing, though different, are not necessarily inferior. The point, really, is not to think *like* another, or speak *for* another, but to think in ways that allow us to speak *with* another in a manner that recognizes differences as opportunities for improving understanding.

We cannot begin to incorporate indigenous historical perspectives into our Western historiography until we consider the meanings of oral accounts in their own settings. Aboriginal groups have their own methods of classifying history – methods that distinguish between good and bad, between stories that cannot be altered and those that can. Each Aboriginal group has its own way of distinguishing the based-on-fact, the fictional, and the true, or what Dell Hymes has classified as the “could have been, should have been, and must have been.”⁵¹ It is important for us to distinguish between what is real and what is true, and to be aware that such a distinction may not exist for some people, or that certain people's definitions may contrast with our own. If oral histories are to be accorded appropriate respect in academia and the courts, this will have to be achieved with the consultation and interaction of each cultural group, for it is from within the group that the nuanced methods used to determine the specific indigenous tests appropriate to the case under consideration emerge. Historically, we have tried to bridge the epistemological gulf separating native from newcomer so that we can acquire an understanding of the “other.” Perhaps a more appropriate and rewarding course might be to meet the other in the unstable intellectual middle ground and from that more tenuous position work collectively in an attempt to understand one another.