



A photograph of Australian infantrymen around a fire, listening to a story in November 1917
SOURCE: STORYTELLING – WIKIPEDIA

Coast Salish Peoples

Oral history in stories

How storytelling helped propagate Coast Salish culture, history, and identity.

With increasing popularity in written, televised, and digitized media, many overlook both the cultural and historical relevance of traditional storytelling. Modern stories are often treated in the context of entertainment—in the form of novels, films, or more recently, digital platforms like role-playing games (Driscoll, 2018). However, the purposes of modern stories are not

secluded to leisure. Stories are everywhere ranging from marketing and business networking to political praxis and public relations (Choy, 2017; Jackson, 2002; Lawrence & Paige, 2016). Traditionally, stories are a medium for cultural teaching (Archibald, 2008). Predating writing, many ancient cultures used oral storytelling to communicate and pass down generational knowledge. Storytelling is a popular medium even

dating back to Cave Paintings earlier than Ancient Mesopotamia. Still, stories are underappreciated today. When recording history, people are drawn to written traditions and that quality of permanence associated with artifacts and manuscripts (Ockert, 2019). Storytelling, as a means of recording history, is scrutinized for its subjectivity and decay of information. While written history undeniably has its merits, the pretense that writing is the only fashionable form of recording history is fairly problematic. >>>

»»» Many cultures depend on oral traditions which even supersede written practices (Hanson, n.d.). The Coast Salish peoples, a group of Indigenous Nations inhabiting present-day BC and Washington, have maintained cultural traditions, teachings, and values largely without written history (Hanson, n.d.). From an outside perspective, it seems impractical that storytelling, on its own, could pass down cultural teachings and values while recording Coast Salish history over thousands of years. By all accounts, any stories told thousands of years ago would be told completely differently now. The simple answer to this puzzle is that oral traditions function very distinctly

in Coast Salish Nations—in a manner that promotes its specific purpose of passing down culture and preserving history. By exploring these nuances in storytelling and contextualizing the environments where oral tradition thrives, only then can the role of stories be properly understood and the enigma that is Coast Salish cultural continuity truly be solved.

Confronting Misconceptions

Coast Salish storytelling is widely misunderstood. People consider some more popular stories—Creation Myths—and generalize these stories to Coast Salish stories broadly. This fallacy of composition is dangerously misleading given that storytelling is very diverse.

Tales like the Squamish story *Raven, Seagull, and Box of Daylight* have audiences exposed to these abstract and symbolic narratives. Meanwhile, most stories are actually of personal experiences or place-based narratives with more specific cultural and historical relevance; Creation Myths are still important, but they should be recognized as only one kind of Coast Salish storytelling (Archibald, 2008). Consider how most abstract tales are absent of more specific history and cultural knowledge. If all Coast Salish stories were abstract, storytelling could not possibly maintain historical records. Instead, the storytelling landscape is broad, where differences are very apparent.

Squamish Creation Myth: *Raven, Seagull, and Box of Daylight*

In the Squamish Creation myth *Raven, Seagull, and Box of Daylight*, the narrative follows a Raven, who was upset with the state of the world—an invariable darkness. So, one day, an idea came to the Raven to trick the Seagull into opening her Box of Daylight. The Raven hid sea urchins under the Seagull's doorstep. As Seagull painfully stepped onto these spines, Raven offered to remove them. However, since the world was in darkness, Raven feigned poor vision, hurting and stabbing Seagull more than helping it to remove these spines from its foot. Raven suggested opening the Box of Daylight to allow him to help, to which Seagull reluctantly obliged, letting a sliver of light out. The light excited the Raven, who leaped to open the Box of Daylight completely. The light escap-

-ed the longhouse and spread across the universe. This is how the world started (Museum of Vancouver, n.d.).



Illustration depicting the world after the Box of Daylight is released
SOURCE: VICKERS AND BUDD – RAVEN BRINGS THE LIGHT (2013)

Deciphering Value

This Squamish Creation Myth is perhaps one of the most famous Coast Salish stories. Similar tropes have origins in Tlingit and Haida culture, and Trickster figures like the Raven have roots in the Sto:lo nation among other Indigenous peoples (Archibald, 2008). At its core, the story teaches

cultural values of stewardship, balance, and collective benefit. The Raven, symbolizing trickery and deception, becomes an unlikely hero in restoring harmony and balance to the universe. Undeniably, this Creation Myth passes on some cultural values and lessons. However, the story itself is quite detached from any specific practices or personal experiences, precluding the story acting as a historical record. The Creation Myth serves its role of passing on cultural heritage but still fails to broadly teach about traditions.



Illustration of the seagull over the Box of Daylight.
SOURCE: VICKERS AND BUDD – RAVEN BRINGS THE LIGHT (2013)

Musqueam's Story

In Musqueam's story, elders would retell a unique narrative surrounding a small lake called *xʷməmqʷe:m* (Camosun Bog) where the *sʔi:lqəy* (double-headed serpent) lived. Children were told stories of unknowing people who would enter the bog and never reappear. The



Still depicting the path carved out by *sʔi:lqəy*
SOURCE: MUROTANI – THE DOUBLE-HEADED SERPENT (2015)

sʔi:lqəy was described as massive such that its path from the lake to the *staləw* (river) created the creek flowing through Musqueam today. Storytellers said that wherever the serpent went, the landscape would perish, and a new plant, the *məθkʷəy* would bloom in its place. Hence why the place where Musqueam is today is named *xʷməθkʷəyəm*—place of the *məθkʷəy* (Musqueam Indian Band, n.d.).



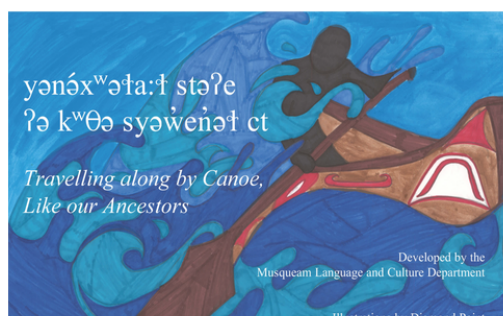
A Welcome pole at UBC featuring the Double-headed serpent.
SOURCE: TAYLOR, PM; SPARROW JR., MUSQUEAM ARTIST (2016)

Embedding Knowledge

Musqueam's story of Camosun Bog and the double-headed serpent is a strict departure from the abstractness of Raven, Seagull, and Box of Daylight. Musqueam's tale describes specific historical and geographical knowledge relating to the nation's ancestral land. The narrative of the double-headed very directly cautions children of the Camosun bog, a deceptively dangerous environment. Meanwhile, the serpent's wrath is used to explain culturally relevant terrain and vegetation. The story passes on historical knowledge and conveys some cultural values. However, the story itself still fails to encompass a breadth of Musqueam traditions, cultural values, and social systems. Clearly, there is more to storytelling than Creation Myths.

Other Narratives

Creation Myths, on their own, are frankly not enough: at best, they are fragmented oral historical records. These Myths serve a more generalized purpose of passing down cultural heritage and broader cultural values. Meanwhile, Coast Salish storytelling often manifests in simpler personal stories or fictional lessons. Through these mediums, Coast Salish culture and values are directly transferred to the youth. Knowledge of the environment and traditional practices are embedded into these narratives. For instance, Musqueam Stories like *Travelling along by Canoe, Like our Ancestors* convey practices with canoeing and explain the role of waterways. *The Bear and the Star* teaches children to recognize



Graphic illustrations developed from Musqueam short stories
SOURCE: MUSQUEAM TEACHING KIT

constellations like Ursa Major. Meanwhile, *Potlatch at Jericho Village* is a simple narrative that teaches culturally relevant practices—potlaches and food systems such as salmon. The moral of the story is that Coast Salish narratives are not identical to these abstract Creation Myths. Stories often are personal experiences, or simple lessons in short stories. If interested, consider further exploring the *Musqueam Teaching Kit* attached at the end.

The Cultural Side

The prevalence and artistry of storytelling in Coast Salish communities is also important to the practice's role in cultural continuity. Stories are not reserved for special occasions. They are common in >>>

»» discourse, and they serve to substitute traditional education systems as excellent mediums for sharing culture and history. (Archibald, 2008; Squamish Nation, 2024). Hence, listening and telling stories in Coast Salish cultures is very routine; even now, when written records and document exist, oration still remains dominant (Hanson, n.d.).

Communal Components

Storytelling is a practice that inherently prospers in gathering. Elders will tell stories together of experiences, legacies of others, and share wisdom. Each person is treated as a separate witness of time—a unique perspective (Wilson, 2016). Gatherings enable the knowledge and experience from everyone to come together and form a complete and accurate account (Wilson, 2016).

"One Elder alone has many stories, but when a number of Elders are placed in the same room, the stories multiply. One Elder may know part of a story and another will know the rest of the story. Together, the Elders tell the history of the nation."

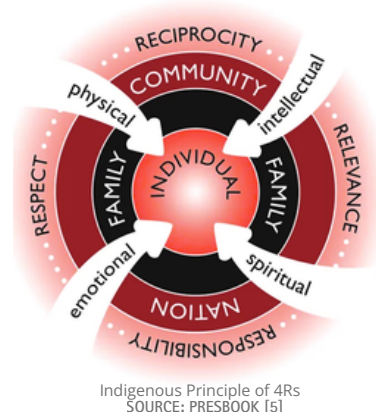
SOURCE: JORDAN WILSON p. 481 (2016)

Storytelling succeeds in Coast Salish cultures because the emphasis on distributed knowledge and history is strong (Wilson, 2016). In Coast Salish culture, there is a practice of having multiple “witnesses” attend events, so that in

time, these witnesses can share that specific oral history (Wilson, 2016). Witnesses are extremely important, with their oral accounts even applicable in legal contexts (Miller, 2012).

Rooted in Culture

One likely explanation for the popularity of storytelling is cultural norms and values. According to Jo-Ann Archibald (2008), the gift of knowledge is only respected if it is shared. It is deemed an elder’s responsibility to value the wisdom or knowledge bestowed upon them by passing down that knowledge and that gift through oral tradition (Archibald, 2008). Storytelling is also done in accordance with the Indigenous principles of 4Rs: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility.



Indigenous Principle of 4Rs
SOURCE: PRESBOOK [5]

The practice of storytelling exemplifies **respect** and **reciprocity** for the knowledge bestowed upon the storyteller and means the fulfillment of an endowed **responsibility**—the sharing of **relevant** cultural teachings.

Different Takeaways

A regular concern with oral history is the ambiguity in leaving with a “correct” interpretation (Motegi, 2021). As an exercise, consider how a listener should respond to the story Raven, Seagull, and Box of Daylight. There are

a diversity of cultural lessons from realizing stewardship to considering deception as necessary.

In Motegi’s (2021) Indigenous-focused coursework study working with youth, she observed that this dissent in moral conclusions is not hypothetical but a genuine concern.

If a story is to enact a specific purpose of teaching specific cultural values, how can it be ensured that the listener absorbs that particular element from a story?

The truth is that differences in interpretation are unavoidable as with any medium. This is not necessarily disadvantageous, however. Several Coast Salish commentators have concluded that perhaps the resulting discourse and engagement with a story is valuable in its own right (Motegi, 2021; Wilson, 2016). Engaging with the story again simply means that the narrative is better embedded in one’s memory.

Repeating Stories

Indigenous commentator Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) resonates with a sentiment of processing storytelling and not providing “a meaning right after hearing a story”. While listeners still bear a responsibility to listen with “three ears”, finding out the meaning of a story is rarely immediate (Archibald, 2008). Instead, stories should be enga- »»

-ged with over and over. The repetition of Coast Salish stories was exactly how Creation Myths are still prevalent today. In time, the listener would become the storyteller, and these stories would continue to live on. Repetition along with communal storytelling was undeniably fundamental in ensuring the preservation of accuracy in stories—a typical concern with oral tradition (Harvey Mccue, 2010; Ockert, 2019; Squamish Nation, 2024). Repetition of these stories also deepened cultural connections.

Formation of Identity

Circling back to how a person's response to a story is nuanced, stories are essential in grounding a person's unique understanding and identity (Knocker, 2022). Rarely in

Coast Salish storytelling is a deeper lesson directly told—that responsibility is given to the listener (Archibald, 2008). Metis politician Sue Olsen considers that engaging with storytelling was integral to finding her own cultural identity (Knocker, 2022):

“Storytelling or oral history was always a part of my life growing up. I always knew where I came from and who my people were. It is important to me as it gave me direction and my identity.”

SOURCE: KNOCKER (2022)

Appreciating Oration

All that being said, stories should be appreciated in the environment where they are originally shared in. After all, a piano composition cannot be properly enjoyed by only glancing at the music sheet.

In Coast Salish cultures, storytelling along with many practices are largely oral—evinced by the presence of oration even in law (Miller, 2012). Oral storytelling has subtle nuance in the delivery and broader retelling style of a storyteller (Wilson, 2016). Even in casual conversation, these minor details or changes ought to be considered: whether it be the precedence in a narrative, each minor element of oration can hold some significance (Wilson, 2016).

Epilogue

Traditional storytelling is often undervalued in contemporary contexts, being dismissed as mere entertainment or “inferior” to written records. However, for the Coast Salish peoples, oration has continued to function as an essential system for cultural continuity and historiography (Archibald, 2008). Beyond the abstract narratives of *Raven*, *Seagull*, and *Box of Daylight* and their cultural teachings, Coast Salish stories often include geographical and cultural knowledge (Archibald, 2008). Tales range from cautioning children of dangerous places to teaching people about constellations in the night sky. Stories are valuable historical records with cultural traditions and practices

like potlatches or food systems such as salmon often appearing as narrative elements. When special events happen, witnesses can collectively preserve a complete recount (Wilson, 2016). Even then, without the cultural embrace of storytelling like in less oral societies, oral traditions would struggle in propelling culture and preserving history.

Storytelling works in Coast Salish nations because of the cultural norms that promote oration. In Musqueam, the theory of distributed knowledge and the significant communal element of storytelling plays key roles (Wilson, 2016). Archibald (2008) eloquently explains how knowledge is also

only valued and respected if that gift is shared. An elder is essentially endowed the responsibility to use stories for teaching and sharing culture and history. There is also a correlation to the principle of 4Rs with respect, reciprocity, relevance, and responsibility all involved (Archibald, 2008). The diversity or difficulty in finding meaning in a story is typically a cause of concern. But as Motegi (2021) explored, the contents of a story is intended to be contemplated over. A resulting discourse is natural, promoting a communal element of storytelling. The nuance and unique story takeaways are integral for a person to find their unique cultural identity and understanding (Knockers, 2022).

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