

## Chapter 7

# A research journey documenting Tl'azt'en Nation's ancestral history of Yeko

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**Abstract:** *Collaborative research is an effective research method for meeting community needs. This chapter examines the experiences and challenges around developing a community-based documented history that recorded Tl'azt'en Nation's settlement at Cunningham Lake (Yeko) in British Columbia, Canada. This research was completed under the guidance of the elders as part of their language and culture program to preserve their knowledge and pass it on to the younger generations. The documented information about the land and settlement will be used further for educational purposes in the local school. It will also hopefully assist with the restoration and protection of this important traditional site.*

We Indians, we live by unwritten law, we don't carry around a whole bunch of books — we carry it in our heads for survival. (Yekooche elder Alfred Joseph, pers. comm., 5 June 2008)

### Prologue (by Ross Hoffman)

Conducting research within an indigenous nation is an endeavour that comes with its own unique set of cultural, ethical, historical and political contexts. This is certainly true today within the Canadian province of British Columbia, where the vast majority of land was never ceded to the Crown and the question of ownership continues to be debated within judicial processes and treaty negotiations. It can become even more complex when a researcher is asked to document the history of a traditional village site. When the researcher is from outside the community and especially if he or she is not an aboriginal person, it is vital that a respectful, trusting, learning relationship is established between the researcher and the members of the community. As a graduate

student in my research methodology course, Chris Gall studied the literature and listened to the words of the other students in his cohort, all of whom are Aboriginal. As we approached the end of the course, which coincided with Chris' completion of the program's course requirements, he was worried by the fact that he did not have a research topic for his thesis. Then this research opportunity presented itself. Initially, Chris was not sure if he should explore this potential offer that was being presented to him. When asked, my advice to him was that it would be a mistake for him to take it simply because it was being offered, he didn't have a research topic and it came with full financial support. I told him that if it 'felt right' for him, then go and meet with the elders who wanted this work done; that way he would know for sure, one way or another, if this was the work he truly wanted to do.

As you will read in the following pages, it is clear that this research relationship was meant to be. As Chris' thesis supervisor, I have had the pleasure of witnessing the unfolding of his lived experience of conducting indigenous research, in all its intricacies. More importantly, I have witnessed something that I have had the gift of knowing myself, the beauty of the transformation that can take place when we, as researchers, as learners, open ourselves to the teachings of elders.

## Introduction

The 4x4 bumped and banged as we slowly made our way down the deactivated forest road. This was my second time travelling to this place; the first trip, a week earlier, was much muddier, although now the mosquitoes were far worse. I sprayed myself down with repellent and then offered some to my companions. My thoughts quickly drifted to those living here long ago...how could they have survived without bug spray? The first trip had brought me only to the edge of this new landscape; new only in terms of my experience, as I would soon learn this place was truly ancient. That first trip we explored the periphery, walking briefly through a meadow and along the adjacent lake shore. Thinking back on the idea of periphery as I write this, I feel as though this whole project has brought me to the edge of a way of knowing and being strangely at odds with my own, while at the same time not. This second trip was deeper, both in terms of our travel within the territory, as well as for me personally. I could barely hold back my excitement as we neared the end of the road. Growing up mostly in the city, this road had provided my first 'offroading' experience, and I liked it. The condition of the road added to the sense I felt of exploring; not in any true sense, as people from the community still fish and hunt here regularly, but I felt as though I was travelling into the great unknown. With each bump, and bang, I was learning more of their territory.

We boarded Ralph's aluminium boat and were soon cruising down the lake. As I scanned the wilderness around me, my senses heightened as I took in my surroundings: new sights, smells and even tastes as we hit a wave, sending a splash of cool water into my partially open mouth. I was experiencing the place I had heard and read so much

about...Yeko. I closed my eyes for a moment and was overwhelmed by a sense of wonder tied to this place and its importance, not just now but throughout history.

## The research project

We have to talk about what we know...the way we know it. (Alfred Joseph, pers. comm., 5 June 2008)

These words echo the desire of Tl'azt'en Nation to record the knowledge of its elders. Because of this desire, I was given the incredible opportunity to participate in a community-based oral history project under the Tl'azt'en Nation/University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) Community–University Research Alliance. This study was community driven and has involved the collection of knowledge that pertains to Yekooche Nation's and Tl'azt'en Nation's ancestral home of Yeko (Cunningham Lake) in present-day central British Columbia, Canada. The information collected includes oral history related to life and settlement around Yeko and specifically the village site of Yekoozdli.

Oral history, one of the most ancient and venerated staples of human culture, has all but disappeared in Western societies, supplanted by ink and paper and an ideal that the written word is authoritative. Julie Cruikshank (1992:33–4) described the capacity of the oral tradition<sup>1</sup> when she wrote:

Aboriginal oral tradition differs from western science and history, but both are organized systems of knowledge that take many years to learn. Oral tradition seems to present one way to challenge hegemonic history. It survives not by being frozen on the printed page but by repeated retellings. Each narrative contains more than one message. The listener is part of the storytelling event too, and a good listener is expected to bring different life experiences to the story each time he or she hears it and to learn different things from it at each hearing. Rather than trying to spell out everything one needs to know, it compels the listener to think about ordinary experience in new ways.

I have tried to listen well and have learned a great deal as a result. I have learned about life, respect, and the history and traditions of the Dakelh people, for which I am truly grateful.

While oral history is facing challenges in being maintained in indigenous communities, there has been a renewed push for preservation alongside the legitimisation of this knowledge form within the Canadian legal system. In the 1997 *Delgamuukw* decision it was stated that the oral histories of Aboriginal peoples must be given equal consideration and weight to other forms of evidence (*Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* [1998] 1 C.N.L.R. 14). Chief Justice Lamer maintained that it was

necessary to ‘adapt the laws of evidence so that the Aboriginal perspective on their practices, customs and traditions and on their relationship with the land, are given due weight by the courts’ (*Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* [1997] in Calliou 2004:75).

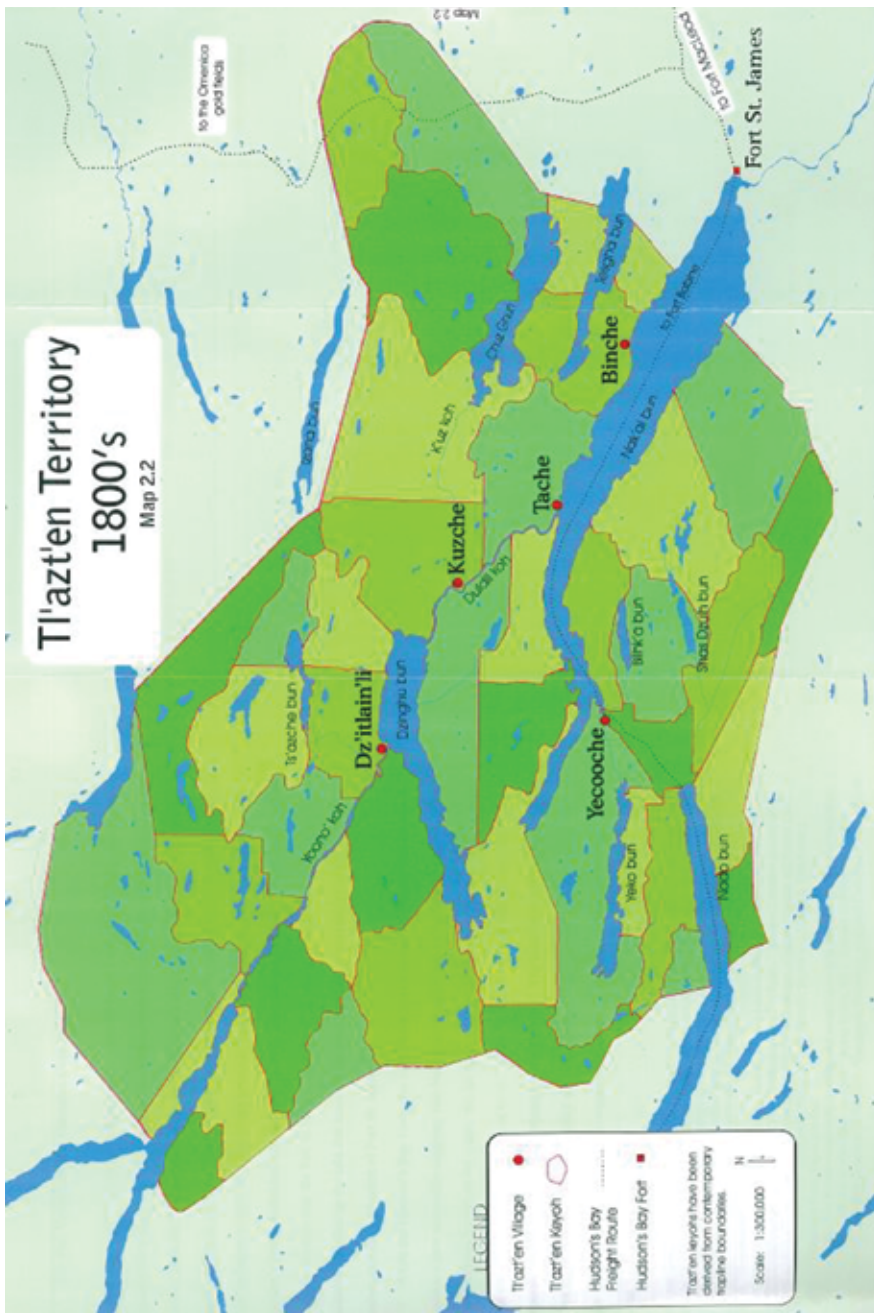
### **Locating myself**

I do not consider myself an expert on anything. As someone coming into the community doing research for my Master’s degree, I saw myself as a tool for the community to use. The elders have been very gracious with a *nado* (Dakelh term for white man) who knows very little. In this sense I consider myself very much a student, both of the university and the community in which I conducted this research. It is important for me to provide a cultural inventory of myself, in the spirit of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Said 1978:25): I am a non-indigenous outsider. My belief system is strongly influenced by the Christian tradition in which I was raised. My father is of Germanic descent, and his family comes from the rural inter-lake district of Manitoba. They were immigrant farmers. My mother is Danish and English. I was raised in the urban centre of Vancouver and come from a middle-class background. I am also an academic in that I have earned a degree in history, and conducted this research, which became my Master’s thesis in First Nations studies.

In *No Man Is an Island*, Thomas Merton (2005:198) wrote, ‘We make ourselves real by telling the truth’; he goes on to say, ‘Man can hardly forget that he needs to know the truth, for the instinct to know is too strong in us to be destroyed’. The search for truth is what led me to First Nations studies as a discipline. Where history focuses on the writings and records of the coloniser, First Nations studies seeks to present research from an aboriginal perspective. In this research I tried to ‘tell the truth’ by presenting Tl’azt’en’s perspective as much as possible and by listening to the elders whose voices I recorded.

### **Tl’azt’en Nation community profile**

Tl’azt’en Nation is located in North Central British Columbia, approximately 65 kilometres north of Fort St James. Translated, the word *Tl’azt’en* means ‘people by the edge of the bay’ (Tl’azt’en Nation 2006). The Tl’azt’enne self-identify as Dakelhenne, but are also known as ‘Carrier’. The Dakelh language is the traditional language of Tl’azt’en Nation and is a part of the Athapaskan language family (Tl’azt’en Nation 2006). The term *Carrier* is taken from the French word *porteur*, which in turn is a translation from the neighbouring Sekanais term *Aghelh Ne*, which means ‘ones who pack’. Since time immemorial, the Tl’azt’enne have been located in central British Columbia. Tl’azt’en Nation is situated just north of present-day Fort St James in the forested uplands at the confluence of the Nechako Plateau and the Omenica Mountains. Their traditional territory is centred on Stuart (Nakal bun) and Trembleur Lakes. Tl’azt’en’s roughly 652 000 hectares of traditional territory has sustained and provided for countless generations; their means of food, clothing and



**Figure 1:** Tl'azt'en Nation traditional territory, North Central British Columbia. Note: Yecooche is no longer a Tl'azt'en village (Morris 1999)

shelter were found all around them. Historical events, such as the establishment of Fort St James as a trading post in 1806, had a fundamental influence on Tl'azt'en Nation and the traditional way of life (Moran 1994). Fort St James brought many profound changes to Tl'azt'en Nation, from the introduction of tea and sugar into the Tl'azt'en diet to the monthly publication known as 'The Paper that Relates', or *Test'les nauhwelnek*, by Father Morice in 1891 (Johnnie and O'Hara 1992; Moran 1994). The fur trade, over time, dramatically changed the practice of hunting from a primary source of subsistence to a means of acquiring trade goods in exchange for furs (Hall 1992:70).

Over the past 50 years, Tl'azt'en Nation has seen many significant changes. Some of these developments include the installation of electricity and the water and sewage system. In the 1960s the government provided funding for a road from Fort St James to Tache (Moran 1994). The direct access that this road offered was the first of its kind on Tl'azt'en territory; as Justa Monk explains, 'when the road was built everything changed' (Moran 1994:20). Although accessibility was seen as a great benefit to Tl'azt'en Nation, it came at a cost. Justa Monk recounts the wonderful sense of community before the existence of the road and how during the winter people would travel between Tache and Fort St James in large groups of ten or more teams of horses. In the summer travel was by boat and people stopped to have tea and visit the various communities on their way into Fort St James (Moran 1994:18–20).

Today Tl'azt'en Nation has a total population of approximately 1300 people, with 500 members living off-reserve (Tl'azt'en Nation 2006). Tl'azt'en Nation now comprises four villages identified as Tache (Tachie), Binche (Pinchi), Dzit'ainli (Middle River) and K'uzche (Grand Rapids) (Moran 1994). The largest village, Tache, is located on the shores of Stuart Lake and is where Tl'azt'en Nation's elementary school, health centre and administrative offices are located. The Tl'azt'en Natural Resource/Treaty Office is the administrative department that oversees issues related to resource management. Traditionally, natural resources were managed solely through local governance systems such as *bahlats* (potlatch), *keyohs* (family territories) and the clan system (Brown 2002; Hudson 1983; Morris and Fondahl 2002).

Tl'azt'en Nation traditional governance uses a hereditary clan system. Clan membership was matrilineal and marriage within a clan was forbidden (Hall 1992). Through the clan system the land was divided into *keyohs*, in which families had access to a variety of resources and were set up as stewards of their territory. The family head controlled the hunting, fishing and gathering on the *keyoh* (Carrier Sekani Tribal Council 1998). Justa Monk's statement, 'every family had its territory — its reef or sand bar for fishing, its area for hunting and trapping, its meadow for hay' (Moran 1994:33), reaffirms how effective the traditional management systems were in sustaining the Tl'azt'enne.

The territory and people of Tl'azt'en Nation have been significantly affected by many industrial developments, including the establishment of a mercury mine on

Pinchi Lake in the 1940s, the construction of a railroad line by the Pacific Great Eastern Railway Company in the 1970s, and the development of the forestry industry (Morris and Fondahl 2002). Despite the broad-scale changes that these developments have brought, Tl'azt'en Nation is striving to maintain its cultural identity. The Tl'azt'en Elders Society is a registered non-profit society that brings elders and community members together to foster the transmission of language and culture. Their mission is to 'provide leadership by demonstrating traditional ways of doing things. Tl'azt'en Elders Society is committed to working towards unity, respect and love for our people, land and animals through stories, gatherings and traditional teachings. We are the knowledge holders and mentors to set footprints for many generations' (unpublished community document n.d.). Tl'azt'en elders are working hard to revitalise the Dakelh language and culture among the youth in order to promote healing and to foster a larger sense of community. At a Yekooche information session on 5 June 2008, which I conducted as part of my research, Tl'azt'en elder Helen Johnnie explained, 'All this we're trying to get the language back and the culture for the students, whose growing up after us we're gone, nobody is going to talk to them and nobody is going to teach them what to do. What we been doing long ago.'

### ***Yekooche community profile***

The Yekoochet'en (people of Yekooche) have lived in the Stuart Lake area for thousands of years in a rich area encompassing the Skeena and Fraser watersheds. The Yekoochet'en, also known as the Portage Band, shared their resources and knowledge, allowing the Hudson's Bay Company to establish a lucrative fishery on Yeko (Cunningham Lake) and to freight goods between Stuart and Babine Lakes. The Yekoozdli village site at the mouth of the creek was the original settlement of the Portage Band. It was the site of a fish weir and a productive whitefish fishery. The Yekoochet'en gradually settled at their current location at the head of Stuart Lake in the 1880s. Many continued to maintain cabins and smokehouses at Yeko.

After contact the Yekoochet'en saw their rights and way of life consistently eroded as trappers, prospectors and resource companies were given access to their traditional lands. During this time many children were removed from the village at Portage and sent to residential schools, where they were prevented from using their own language or practising their cultural beliefs. In 1959, for the purposes of settling reserve land disputes, the federal government amalgamated the communities of Tache, Pinche, Yekooche and Dzitlanli into one large band called the Stuart-Trembleur Lakes Band. In 1987 the Stuart-Trembleur Lakes Band changed its name to the Tl'azt'en Nation. In 1994 the Yekooche Band separated from Tl'azt'en Nation to form a distinct band known as the Yekooche First Nation (Yekooche First Nation n.d.a). After the communities split, many elders remained in Tache although originally from Yekooche. Tache was never a permanent settlement historically; it was used as a rest stop more or less during travel and was a seasonal fish camp. This changed slowly as social and

cultural impacts encouraged the Dakelh people to settle in permanent locales. Tache grew rapidly as people were encouraged to settle closer for the purpose of sending their children to residential school, first in Fort St James and then to Lejac, located outside of Fort Fraser. Today Yekooche has a population of 227 members, with 120 people living in the community (Yekooche First Nation n.d.b).

## Research purpose and objectives

This research has developed a community-based documented history that records Tl'azt'en Nation's settlement at Yeko (Cunningham Lake). This information was obtained by taking elders out on the land to describe the significance of the place and through one-on-one interviews. Information was obtained only with permission of elders. In order to preserve this area and the knowledge pertaining to these sites, it was important to document the stories and experiences of the elders. The documented information about the land and settlement will be used further for educational purposes and hopefully for the restoration and protection of these important areas.

Through my writing I hope to be able to take the reader on a journey through the territory and present the power that comes from stories and lessons when the elders go out on the land. The Tl'azt'enne are also interested in using this research to build excitement among the youth, and perhaps to begin to take them out to the sites with elders, where they can be taught the stories. My goal was to produce an excellent piece of indigenous research, centred around a First Nations perspective and worldview. As a non-indigenous outsider, I try my best to be as open as possible to understanding new perspectives and ways of knowing. In this way I aspired to carry out my research in ways that were respectful to the community, and to each individual I came into contact with. I was focused on building relationships and recognised that how I brought myself to the community would dictate how they in turn would respond to me.

The central objective of this research was to develop a community-based documented history of Yeko. This was accomplished by partnering with members of both Tl'azt'en Nation and Yekooche Nation to record the oral stories that they were willing to share. I employed qualitative methods, such as an elder retreat, focus groups and open-ended conversational interviews, as well as archival and published sources, to document their history. In contrast to previous written historical accounts of indigenous people, I have strived in my research to focus on the Tl'azt'en perspective and to draw knowledge from the community using archival research and published sources to complement the oral testimony. As Yekooche elder Alfred Joseph explained at the Yekooche information session on 5 June 2008, 'I'm 69 years old, many of us elders we won't last very much longer and we're all worried of how to convey this... put it in book so that it can be taught in school, even in university'. In an interview I conducted with Tl'azt'en elder Willie Mattess on 26 January 2009, he stated:



We got to make at least one book the way people gonna understand it. We make one book, we're on the way...I want to see these young people control everything. That's what I want to see, it's not my future, it's those people like you — your future. Right now there is nowhere to turn to, nothing.

The results of this research will be made available to community members, as well as the community school, in order to educate Tl'azt'en youth about their past. Additionally, almost all facets of this research have focused on capacity building with members of Tl'azt'en Nation.

## Locating the research

I have been greatly assisted by the Tl'azt'en Nation/UNBC Community–University Research Alliance (CURA) project protocols, which were invaluable in helping me carry out this research in a respectful way. The Tl'azt'en Nation guidelines for research within their territory, developed before the CURA project (1997), were also valuable, and I had several community members working alongside me during the research. I have framed my project as an oral history, and, as indigenous research, a First Nations perspective is presented through the oral stories. These are complemented using archival research and an academic perspective. This is participatory research in that the community was the driving force behind the project, and approached me about doing the research. Community members have been involved from the beginning to the end. They were directing the research and the results are theirs.

This project involved producing a written history for Tl'azt'en Nation to be used as an educational tool to teach the community about its past. Early settlement sites in the area have been given very little critical attention to date. In fact, this project is one of the first to document the location of such sites and to record the stories elders share around these places. The project focuses on the area around Yeko, which is where most of the Tl'azt'enne were settled before the arrival of the fur trade.

CURA funding originates from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The Tl'azt'en Nation/UNBC CURA project has been a six-year partnership between Tl'azt'en Nation and UNBC. The goals of the partnership are as follows:

The purpose of the Tl'azt'en Nation-UNBC CURA project is to enhance the capacity of Tl'azt'en Nation to effectively engage in culturally and ecologically sustainable natural resource management, and to enhance the capacity of UNBC researchers and their students to effectively contribute to First Nation community needs through collaborative research. (Tl'azt'en Nation and UNBC CURA n.d.a)

## Exploring urban identities and histories

The equal partnership benefits both Tl'azt'en and UNBC. The objectives of the partnership provide an excellent means of fostering mutually beneficial relationships and demonstrate what can be done in relation to some of the issues university programs face in terms of incorporating indigenous knowledge into the academy. The objectives are:

- To strengthen the cultural development of the Tl'azt'en community by capturing resources and expertise to promote the transfer of TEK [Traditional Ecological Knowledge] from older to younger generations
- To enhance the social and economic potential of the Tl'azt'en community by providing the expertise to facilitate the development of alternative, culturally appropriate environmental/science curricula for Tl'azt'en youth; and by providing a map to ecotourism development, informed by robust research and Tl'azt'en values
- To provide graduate training experience with First Nations partners that will foster knowledge of cross-cultural research requirements and experience in community-relevant research
- To provide training and enhance research capacity among Tl'azt'enne in areas important to integrated natural resource management
- To improve First Nations content across the curricula of UNBC's academic programs
- To ensure research results are available to regional, national and international audiences; and
- To enhance the potential of UNBC and Tl'azt'en Nation to develop and strengthen their partnerships. (Tl'azt'en Nation and UNBC CURA n.d.a)

The research objectives of the CURA project further indigenous research by helping researchers carry out their work in a respectful manner.

The CURA project has several different knowledge streams. This research fits within the Tl'azt'en Ecological Knowledge Stream, which has been researching methods of recording traditional knowledge. The individuals working in this stream have been 'reviewing information, and providing recommendations for developing these methods further' (Tl'azt'en Nation and UNBC CURA n.d.a). The hope is that this will allow Tl'azt'en Nation to record and perpetuate their TEK and train community members to continue this work on their own. This project will serve to further Tl'azt'en's goals in 'developing curriculum material to enhance educational objectives' (Tl'azt'en Nation and UNBC CURA n.d.a). This has also been an important part of my research, as I am expected to give something back to the community for their use. The community product will be a written record that can be used in the schools. This document of their history will combine Tl'azt'en and Yekooche oral history with the written historical record. The specific goals of the TEK stream are 'to gather information on medicinal

uses of plants, traditional Tl'azt'en place names, and aboriginal perspectives on forest health. This information will enhance the knowledge of UNBC researchers, and provide valuable resources for Tl'azt'en Nation' (Tl'azt'en Nation and UNBC CURA n.d.b). Researchers under this stream are expected to 'learn interview methods, and develop and practice interview protocols with TEK experts' (Tl'azt'en Nation and UNBC CURA n.d.b).

## **Methodological approaches and perspectives**

### ***Community-based research***

This is community-based research — I was approached by the community to carry out this project and community members have been involved throughout. As Graham Hingangoroa Smith (2000:210) suggests, 'Indigenous peoples must set the agenda for change themselves'. As a non-indigenous outsider I am very honoured to have been given this privilege and opportunity, and I come to it with a deep sense of responsibility. Shiu-Thorton (in Fondahl et al. 2009:2–3) describes community-based participatory research as:

A research approach that involves community members/partners in all phases of research. It seeks a collaborative approach that is equitable for all participants engaged in the research process, from the inception of the proposed research to the dissemination and publication of research findings. It is grounded in the conscious recognition that historically, and particularly within ethnic minority communities, research has been done on (in contrast to with) communities of color by predominantly white researchers.

The community requested an oral history project backed up by archival research, and eventually they hope to conduct an archaeological study of the area. The inspiration for this project came from several elders in the community who spoke extensively with Simon John, a community leader and the former Tl'azt'en Nation Language and Culture Coordinator. They wanted to locate and record their early dwelling sites and the oral stories associated with those places before the knowledge was completely lost. The main area of interest was Yeko, but only a handful of people are left who remember these places and the stories, and they are aging. The elders were feeling stretched by the CURA project and did not want more research and interviews conducted, but they were very excited by this project and pushed for it to take place.

The research plan initially involved a trip with the elders onto the land for about a week to record the places and the knowledge surrounding them. The community pushed for this to take place very quickly, and wanted the trip scheduled for mid-June

2008. They wanted to visit the sites before all the leaves were out, making things less visible. The week-long camp did not take place due to several deaths in the community.

As discussed earlier, context is very important. Harold Adams Innis, considered Canada's pre-eminent fur trade historian, believed that the context needed to be experienced as much as possible. Robin W Winks, in the foreword of *The Fur Trade in Canada*, wrote that Innis did not 'make the mistake, common in 1930 and increasingly common since, of thinking that history could be written exclusively from archives and libraries, from one's study, comfortable and essentially untravelled...he realized that he must see the country of which he wrote' (Innis 2001:xxix). Innis famously travelled in an 18-foot canvas-covered Hudson Bay canoe to the Mackenzie River basin (Innis 2001:xxix) to experience the fur trade.

During my research I made three trips to Yeko. The first trip was to assess the condition of roads and to discuss where to hold our camp. Our second trip, on 19 June, was preliminary reconnaissance during which we found plenty of physical evidence of past settlement, including cache pits, house pits and even grave markers. The third trip was a day camp with several elders and community members. There is something very deep and powerful about hearing the elders' stories out on the territory. I spent the day listening closely while sitting around a roaring fire enjoying moose stew and bannock, a traditional fried bread.

The research methods included four main phases: the initiation phase, the data collection phase, the data analysis phase, and the presentation or knowledge translation phase. The initiation phase occurred in the summer of 2008. I spent as much time as possible in the community in order to learn about their culture and to build relationships. I researched Tl'azt'en Nation archives, attended language and culture meetings and elders meetings, and assisted a CURA researcher at two community events. This allowed me to become more aware of the surroundings and, more importantly, allowed the community to become comfortable with me. On 26 June 2008, at a community meeting to which all interested community members were invited and encouraged to attend, the objectives, methods, relevance and outcomes of the study, as well as benefits to the community, were discussed. There was time for the community members to give feedback and ask questions. This meeting was also used to determine if there were any other issues related to the study that the community felt needed to be addressed.

A support group of knowledgeable and respected community members was established to guide the research. These members aided in the identification of important stories and pieces of history. This information determined the timing of the rest of the project, as several elders were not well enough to be interviewed and needed to be interviewed in the community at a later date. During this initiation phase, community members were selected to act as experts and guides in the next phase of the project. Methods of compensation for their time and expertise were determined before the fieldwork began.<sup>2</sup>

The data collection phase began during the summer of 2008. The elders were taken out onto the land to describe the significance of various sites. Semi-structured interview techniques were used. Simon John and Beverly John (Tl'azt'en Nation Research Coordinator) helped develop the interview questions with the community and Simon was present during interviews to aid in the translation process. The information gathered in the field was documented using written, audio and video techniques, according to the wishes of the elders/experts. This material is stored in the Tl'azt'en Nation Treaty Office Archives. Archival research of written sources has also been used to supplement the oral history. This involves Department of Indian Affairs documents, Hudson's Bay Company archival material and the journals of early visitors to the region.

The research participants included elders of Yekooche Nation and Tl'azt'en Nation and were selected through peer nomination. Community leaders Beverly John and Simon John aided in this process. Each research participant:

- was a member of Yekooche Nation or Tl'azt'en Nation
- was knowledgeable: identified by peers as an 'expert' by having a deep knowledge of the research site
- had recognised authority: identified as an 'expert' by a minimum of two Tl'azt'en community members.

All participants involved in the project received an honorarium, as recommended by the community researcher or community research coordinator. It is practice to give honorariums and a small gift for being a part of CURA research. Throughout the research process, interview transcripts were returned to participants for verification and feedback. At the end of the project participants will verify the research and a community presentation for interested community members will take place. The community members will also be invited to the thesis defence. Materials will be made available on the CURA website (<http://cura.unbc.ca>) as per the individual consent forms.

During the data analysis phase, the information collected from the elders and from the written record was analysed in order to develop a rich historical narrative of the area around Yeko.

The nature of this research meant it involved a community and elders who needed to be shown the utmost regard for their ways of knowing and the stories they shared with me as an outsider. I began studying the Carrier language to show respect and deepen my own understanding. In addition to this respect, I will be giving back directly to the community in the form of a usable product. One way of achieving community validation was to have a community member, Simon John, on my thesis committee and I will complete a presentation of my thesis in the community. This will further serve to enable the community and elders to validate the work.

It was very exciting to see how this project developed and unfolded. Looking back, I feel as though I have been able to integrate both academic research and indigenous knowledge, and to develop a document that is useful to the community. Paul Thompson describes the essential qualities an interviewer must possess: ‘an interest and respect for people as individuals, and flexibility in response to them; an ability to show understanding and sympathy for their point of view; and, above all, a willingness to sit quietly and listen’ (Thompson 1978:165).

During the course of this work 11 elders were formally interviewed one-on-one. These interviews ranged from roughly one to two hours in length. Additionally, the Elders Camp was a group setting that included the participation of other knowledge holders from both communities.

## Research challenges

### *Historical*

Overall, this was a very positive experience. However, at the beginning I experienced first hand the lack of trust and cynicism that can greet an outsider when coming into a community. This is due to a long history fraught with exploitative research (Smith, LT 1999). My presence has been met with anger on more than one occasion. Harsh tones, angry stares and the word *nado* were clearly indicative of the fact that I was the topic being discussed in Dakelh. While glad that members are fervent in their desire to protect both their knowledge and community, what has impressed me the most is the speed in which attitudes change. After speaking from the heart about this research and my place as a non-aboriginal student in First Nations studies, people were much more friendly and welcoming. This increased tremendously as I got to know community members and spent time with them.

### *Political*

It is important to recognise the political context in which this research is taking place. As is common in British Columbia, Tl’azt’en Nation and Yekooche Nation are involved in the British Columbia Treaty Process. My research project originally proposed including Yekooche and Tl’azt’en Nations. The goal was to foster understanding and have the two Nations work together. We held an information session in Yekooche on 5 June 2008. After some initial concerns our meeting seemed to end well. However, an email was soon sent out from the Yekooche Treaty Team saying that my research should cease. In 1994 Yekooche had broken away from Tl’azt’en Nation in order to enter into separate treaty negotiations. Although this project is not about land claims, it is about a traditional site, and therefore was initially perceived as a contentious issue within the treaty process. Though the Yekooche Nation chose not to officially participate in this research project, members were granted permission to participate

on an individual level if they chose. Two of the elders who supported this project live in the village of Yekooche.

This issue surrounding land has come up with each elder I have interviewed so far. The elders spoke of how Yekooche and Tl'azt'en are related. People from the village of Yekooche have lived in the Tl'azt'en village of Tache and vice versa. My preliminary genealogical research supports this. The issue, according to the elders, stems from the European names given to people at baptism. Some had their first and last names reversed or were given new names. The result is that many people in both Nations are unaware of who they are related to and where they come from. The people of Yekooche and Tl'azt'en are deeply related. Yet today many members of each Nation see themselves as separate because they do not understand the historical relationships as broadly as the elders.

### *Institutional*

The main institutional challenge thus far has been the academic timeline. My research project has not progressed in the typical linear fashion. I was already engaged and conducting research before my thesis proposal was completed. The community was pushing for me to begin my work right away, so I completed my Ethics Board application in a matter of days. I then had to go back and fill in pieces of information; for example, my thesis proposal defence was in November 2008 rather than prior to the start of my research. Temporally, conducting research in an indigenous community can take longer, as in this case. The proposed time for a Master's degree is usually two years, but community research requires building relationships and trust, as Willie Mattess frankly put it: 'No, I don't think you want to know everything just right now, just because you're here' (Willie Mattess, pers. comm., 26 January 2009). Likewise, Alfred Joseph questioned me at the Yekooche information session on 5 June 2008; 'Why should I tell you something that is part of me if you do not believe what I am or who I am?' This supports Burgess' (1991:43) argument that access is 'negotiated and renegotiated throughout the research process'; it is 'based on sets of relationships between the researcher and the researched, established throughout a project'. It is also necessary to conduct a community verification of results. I have taken the long way around in completing this research because it is important to do things well. Many of the elders cautioned me on taking shortcuts and, while they were talking literally about my life, I think it applies to this as well: 'Don't try to go shortcut, walk around, right around, it don't matter if you think you got chance...if you go shortcut, that's your life it's gonna be that short' (Willie Mattess, pers. comm., 26 January 2009). Thankfully, I have come to this community at the tail end of the CURA project. This has given me the benefit of established protocols and familiarity with the research process, as well as developed relationships with elders and community members.

## ***Geographical***

Distance posed another challenge to research. Communication is hindered, and travel can be time consuming and tedious. Email, telephone and post were incredibly helpful at bridging that gap and staying in touch as much as possible. Having a research assistant working in Fort St James doing translation required the mailing of interview recordings and transcripts back and forth, which added a delay to the process.

## ***Cultural***

Cultural understanding and learning has been an important part of this project. One asks a lot of the community in collaborative work. There are huge labour, social and cultural costs for the community. I have come to appreciate that the needs of the community come before any schedule with the researcher. Once I had ethics approval, my research was delayed due to the ice on the lake breaking late. There were then several deaths in the community, during which time all work shut down and people came together in support of each other. Because of the late spring in the first year, berry picking season was later, which also delayed the start of my interviews. There were other times when meetings needed to be postponed. Elders also had the opportunity to respond to my interviews in Dakelh, which meant extra time was required for the transcription and translation to English.

## **Closing**

I have worked hard to do what I was asked when the moment arose, whether it was giving a community member or elder a ride to or from a meeting or town, attending a last minute meeting, or delivering items between organisations and communities. It has been a privilege to work alongside a group of patient and helpful elders and community members.

There came a moment in the course of this research when I realised everything was going to be okay, and I could finally enjoy myself. That moment came around the time I went out on the land with the elders. Simon John and several others had spent the majority of the summer camped out at the lake. It is a magnificent spot with a gorgeous view of the territory. We had planned on taking the elders around the area by boat as a way to help them reconnect to this place, and hopefully serve to remind them of the past. Unfortunately, the boat had mechanical issues, which forced us to spend the day at the camp. It was a blessing in disguise.

A moose had been shot that morning; I first saw its lifeless body on a tarp close to the lake. I am not a squeamish person, so while the partially butchered animal did not bother me, it did incite a sense of excitement as I thought of enjoying fresh game on the land. I was put to work chopping vegetables as Simon began making a moose-meat stew. The elders spoke of eating out there as children: vegetables were grown in small



gardens that were tended by the family and stored in root cellars under cabins. Our vegetables came from the grocery store in town.

The elders sat around the fire excitedly reminiscing about a place they all remembered but few had visited recently. I heard a flurry of Dakelh and saw hand gestures point here and there, with plenty of laughter exchanged. Simon prepared the stew over the fire and, as we all sat and ate, the elders began to speak of this place. I was enjoying myself, and the elders, their words and our meal came together harmoniously and that's when I realised that this was, at least for me, the perfect campfire — though it wasn't until sometime later that I came to understand what that meant.

While the food hadn't come entirely from the land, it was prepared and enjoyed on the territory by thankful hearts. This meal had taken many hands to bring it to the table (so to speak), much like my research. The fact that most of the community members I worked with were sitting around that fire was a rare and important thing, as was the fact that the elders were opening up their lives for me to record.

As I listened to the stories, and the elders correcting each other and corroborating to accurately preserve their oral tradition, I realised for the first time that this was truth. While some might label these stories as tales or merely legend, I couldn't help but feel deep within me that they were real. Sitting around a campfire on the territory in which this oral history was born gave it a life that is otherwise lost. I could reach down and dip my hands in the lake that sustained countless generations before us at that very location. I could see the mountains and the stream that were key elements to the stories of the past. I felt a power that flowed through the words that was ancient and deep. It was important. Sitting quietly and listening to the stories unfold around me I was struck by the true cost of that knowledge; the precise sacrifice of time, energy and life that preserving it entailed. One of the elders spoke of his ancestors carrying fire with them as they travelled. This is much like the elders themselves who are keepers of a vast library of living memory amassed over a lifetime. In this way a campfire is a place to impart knowledge of the past to direct the future.

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## Notes

1. Oral history refers to the transmission of historical information whereas the oral tradition is broader in scope and multifaceted. It includes many cultural aspects.
2. This followed the guidelines already established by the CURA project.