

NEW MEDIA REVIEW

Sq'ewlets: A Stó:lō-Coast Salish Community in the Fraser River Valley Virtual Museum

<http://digitalsqewlets.ca/>

DARA KELLY

S*q'ewlets: A Stó:lō-Coast Salish Community in the Fraser River Valley* (Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre and Stó:lō Nation, 2016) is a virtual museum in the form of a website that reflects a collaborative project and long-term relationship between the Sq'ewlets, a Stó:lō-Coast Salish community, and a team of archaeologists at the University of British Columbia. The virtual museum displays nearly three decades of collaborative work, sharing Sq'ewlets stories, history, language, and the deep connection between people and place as a way of situating Sq'ewlets people in the world. The site represents a wealth of knowledge and interactive space, and it invites its visitors to affectively connect to a uniquely Sq'ewlets space. The meaning of the word “Sq'ewlets” comes from the perspective of someone travelling on the river, meaning “to go around a bend in the river.” On a blistering hot day in August, standing at Sq'ewlets above the riverbank, the mountains on both sides of the river impose their quiet dominance – a feeling that is conveyed not only in the written word but also through the curation of images as well as the sound on the website, which expresses the dynamic interaction between the communities along the river and the river itself.

As a member of the Stó:lō community, and a relative to many of the people from Sq'ewlets whose stories are featured in the virtual museum, having the opportunity to hear and see their voices in this medium is a moving experience. I recently returned to Coast Salish territories after living in Aotearoa-New Zealand, for eight years. Thinking about the challenges that I experienced in that time away as a result of the physical distance separating Coast Salish territories and Aotearoa-New Zealand, a virtual space like the Sq'ewlets website was exciting because it offered

a platform enabling a connection between very different sides of the world.

The Sq'ewlets virtual museum brings to mind a concept I encountered while in Aotearoa-New Zealand that is derived from a Tongan view of spatial relations – *taubi vā* (Ka'ili 2005, Māhina 2010). On its own, *vā* refers to space (Māhina 2010), but *taubi vā* describes space that is imbued with relationships (as opposed to the notion that space is empty) (Ka'ili 2005). Embedded within the phrase *taubi vā* is an indication of the responsibility associated with nurturing those relationships. For instance, there are some social relations in which there is no *vā* to be nurtured because the relationship is not strong. Māhina (2010, 188) describes the ordering of genealogy in terms of *vā* as a system of relational exchange over time, *tā*:

From a of *tā-vā* theoretical view, genealogy merges with the fact that all things, in nature, mind, and society, enter into eternal relations of exchange where conflict and order are mediated through symmetry. As a human phenomenon, genealogy is about people who cross paths in physical, emotional, and social ways, culturally ordered and historically altered through intersection and separation.

Where *taubi vā* applies, there is richness of opportunity, and the relationship has the potential to grow. However, *taubi vā* is further imbued with an obligation to nurture the relationship. With a digital space such as the Sq'ewlets virtual museum, the obligation to nurture relationships continues to be negotiated in real-time interactions within Sq'ewlets people and communities, and across broader Stó:lō and Coast Salish contexts; however, as an added space for physical, emotional, social, cultural, and historical interaction, digital space offers a means to connect to Sq'ewlets from afar, no matter how remote in distance or time. As long as the site is maintained online, it may also foster an intergenerational connection to Sq'ewlets stories, “belongings,” and territories for generations not yet born. In the “Story of This Project” page is where I see an alignment with the stated intention of the Sq'ewlets community to share its history with the world through this online space. The Sq'ewlets vision is as follows:

Our ancestors made and used and curated them [our ancient belongings] personally. They were owned and cared for and belonged to our people, and we intend to do the same for them today.

As a means of caring for their ancient belongings, Sq'ewlets people can continue to engage with their ancestral lineages through the virtual museum in a way that reflects cyclical time, where past, present, and future unfold together. To demonstrate my experience of this as a Stó:lō researcher exploring the virtual museum, I was immediately drawn to the link to the Sq'ewlets families page under the broad heading "Sqwélqwel." This section of the virtual museum not only visually captures how Sq'ewlets families and relations extend throughout Coast Salish territories but also draws Sq'ewlets connections nationally, across Canada and globally. The photographs of Sq'ewlets families show the strength of *tauhi vā*, which connects individual experiences and collective identities across generations.

There is a clear intention to foster continuity and to grow the relationships between the "belongings," Sq'ewlets people, and a global audience in the enduring spaces that connect the material, virtual, and storied landscapes of Qithyil, the Sq'ewlets ancestral sites. The belongings are not only ancient, located in the past, for the virtual museum shows how they exist in the present.

REFERENCES

- Ka'ili, Tāvita. 2005. "Tauhi vā: Nurturing Tongan Sociospatial Ties in Maui and Beyond." *Contemporary Pacific* 17 (1): 83-114.
- Māhina, Hūfanga Okusitino. 2010. "Tā, vā, and moana: Temporality, Spatiality, and Indigeneity." *Pacific Studies* 33 (2/3): 168-202.
- Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, and Stó:lō Nation. 2016. "Sq'ewlets: A Stó:lō-Coast Salish Community in the Fraser River Valley." Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre. <http://www.digitalsqewlets.ca/index-eng.php>.