PODCAST

Listening to Fire Knowledges in and around the Okanagan Valley

JUDITH BURR*, with Mathieu Bourbonnais, Amy Cardinal Christiansen, John Davies, Jeff Eustache, Don Gayton, Joe Gilchrist, Dave Gill, Sonja Leverkus, David Lind, Wendy Pope, Gord Pratt, Karis Shearer, Daryl Spencer, Sharon Thesen, Nancy Turner, and Kelsey Winter

The accompanying podcast series is available open access here: https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/view/198357

"Over thousands and thousands of years it was burned," says Secwépemc and Nlaka'pamux Fire Keeper and former wildland firefighter Joe Gilchrist, speaking about the landscape of the southern interior in the opening episode of this scholarly podcast. "You could burn it in a good way, or it's going to burn in a bad way … you pick your poison, or pick your medicine."[1] Poison and medicine: you can hear these and other faces of fire emerge and swirl together in their simultaneity, tension, and complexity in the podcast *Listening to Fire Knowledges in and around the Okanagan Valley*. This is a work of audible research on the history and contemporary challenges of using and controlling fire in and around the Okanagan Valley, a dry valley in the interior of so-called British Columbia. It opens with an introductory prologue, has three main episodes, and closes with a reflective epilogue. Each interviewee in the podcast holds specific and plural forms of expertise and understandings of life with fire. What emerges are storied glimpses of a valley – and, through it, of a wider world – that is both fire-maintained and wildfire-scourged. The Okanagan Valley has been shaped by the entanglements between people and fire for millennia:

* I would like to acknowledge that this research was conducted and created on the unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan people. I would like to thank Dr. Karis Shearer and Dr. Greg Garrard, who co-supervised the graduate research that developed into this academic podcast; my committee members, Dr. Heather Latimer and Dr. Tim Paulson; and members of the SpokenWeb Podcast team, the AMP Lab, the wildfire discussion group in the UBC-Vancouver Forestry School, the FEELed Lab, and the Living with Wildfire Project for their support and help. Thanks to everyone who agreed to an interview or conversation with me for this project and to the anonymous peer reviewers whose insights made this work stronger.

[1] From Episode 1, "Pick your poison, or pick your medicine," *Listening to Fire Knowledges in and around the Okanagan Valley*, minute 00:00:44.

by cultural burns by Syilx Okanagan and Secwépemc communities;[2] by lightning fires and the way they move through human-impacted landscapes; and by patterns of fire control and suppression under settler-colonial governance. In these interviews, listeners can hear how cultural, economic, and scientific fire geographies have been constructed over time under changing regimes of knowledge and power. In the wake of large and severe wildfire seasons and predictions of worsening wildfires fuelled by climate change, there are calls for both interdisciplinary problem-solving and for more public engagement to transform how we live in the fire-prone places of British Columbia and other geographies.[3] Academic and non-academic researchers and creators are taking up these calls.[4] This podcast is a fellow contribution to interdisciplinary, public, and place-based conversations about life with fire.

I conducted this research in 2021 and 2022, and as I write these words at the end of 2023, I am reflecting on Canada's most recent historic summer of wildfire. More than 18 million hectares burned across Canada in 2023, which shatters the record for area burned set in 1995.[5] British Columbia too broke its previous provincial records for annual area burned

[2] Capitalization of "Syilx" varies across Syilx Okanagan publications. I capitalize Syilx in this abstract, following Armstrong, "Living from the Land."

[3] Abbott and Chapman, "Addressing the New Normal"; Copes-Gerbitz, Hagerman, and Daniels, "Transforming Fire Governance," 48; Hoffman et al., "Right to Burn"; Sousa et al., "Social and Historical Dimensions"; Stoof and Kettridge, "Living with Fire"; D'Evelyn et al., "Wildfire."

[4] Christianson and Kristoff, *Good Fire Podcast*, available at https://yourforestpodcast.com/good-fire-podcast; Erin James et al., *Stories of Fire: A Pacific Northwest Climate Justice Atlas*, 2021 and ongoing, available at https://www.theconfluencelab.org/stories-of-fire-atlas; Liz Toohey-Wiese and Amory Abbott, *Fire Season I* (2020) and *Fire Season II* (2022), available at https://fireseason.org/project; Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva, *What Fire Reveals: Stories from the CZU August Lightning Fires in the Santa Cruz Mountains* (podcast), published 6 September 2022, produced by *The Kitchen Sisters Present*, accessed 1 March 2024, https://kitchensisters.org/podcast/what-fire-reveals-stories-from-the-amah-mutsun/. The Kitchen Sisters curated an associated museum exhibit at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History: https://calhum.org/what-fire-reveals-interview/.

[5] Wang et al., "Severe Global Environmental Issues." Although "area burned" alone is a poor metric for wildfire disaster (because too little area burned in the last century is driving more out-of-control wildfires in this one), it is one way to grasp the increasingly vast geographies being affected by fire. More context helps us understand what makes certain fires dangerous: climate-fuelled heat and drought conditions make some fires grow explosively fast; development in the urban-wildland interface puts people and homes in harm's way; most fire-prone landscapes are burning in the heat of summer instead of in the cooler weather of the spring, fall, and winter, spreading fire management resources thin; and a lack of fire protection resources in rural communities puts people in danger – among other factors important to understanding how fires become disasters.

and for the largest wildfire ever recorded.[6] Out-of-control wildfires raced once again across the Okanagan Valley, including the Eagle Bluff wildfire that burned west of Osoyoos and the McDougall Creek wildfire that struck Westbank First Nation, West Kelowna, Kelowna, Lake Country, and surrounding communities almost exactly twenty years after the historic 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park fire.[7] Across Canada and British Columbia, fires endangered and evacuated rural communities where First Nations remain disproportionately affected and inadequately supported,[8] stretched wildfire fighting personnel and resources thin, and lit up news alerts in cities like Toronto and New York City,[9] places unaccustomed to the acrid wildfire smoke that descended upon them from Canada's record-setting blazes. This wildfire season was fuelled by the hotter and drier conditions of a climate warmed by ongoing, profligate fossil fuel combustion by privileged segments of humanity, the benefits and harms of which are distributed with uneven viciousness.[10] People in the Okanagan Valley, like those in many other fire-prone geographies, are contending with what it takes to build healthy and sustainable lives with fire in a warming world and grappling with a lack of practised fire management and use, an unfamiliarity inherited from over a century

[6] BC Wildfire Service, "Wildfire Season Summary," https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/about-bcws/wildfire-history/wildfire-season-summary; "Donnie Creek Wildfire Now Larger Than PEI," CBC News, 28 June 2023.

[7] Rhianna Schmunk, "After Eerily Similar Fires 20 Years Apart, Frustrated Experts Say Advice for Kelowna Is Much the Same," CBC News, 25 August 2023. Detailed incident reports on BC wildfires, including the Eagle Bluff fire and the McDougall Creek fire, are available from the BC Wildfire Service at https://wildfiresituation.nrs.gov.bc.ca.

[8] Matteo Cimellaro, "As the Prairies Burn, Indigenous Communities Deserve Equal Support: Indigenous Climate Action," *National Observer*, 19 May 2023, https://www.nationalobserver.com/2023/05/19/news/prairies-burn-indigenous-deserve-equal-support-indigenous-climate-action; Robert Gray, "Opinion: Canada Must Change How It Approaches and Funds Wildfire Management," *Globe and Mail*, 6 June 2023, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-canada-must-change-how-it-approaches-and-funds-wildfire-management/; Crystal Verhaegue, Emma Feltes, and Jocelyn Stacey, "Nagwediżk'an Gwaneŝ Gangu Ch'inidżed Ganexwilagh: The Fires Awakened Us: Tsilhqot'in Report on the 2017 Wildfires" (Williams Lake, BC: Tsilhqot'in National Government, 2019); McGee, "Evacuating First Nations."

[9] David Leonhardt, "Wildfire Smoke Envelops the US," *New York Times*, 8 June 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/08/briefing/new-york-wildfires-smoke.html; "Forest Fire Smoke Envelops Toronto, Bringing Poor Air Quality, Pollution," CBC News, 7 June 2023.

[10] Darian-Smith, *Global Burning*; Klein, *This Changes Everything*; Marc-André Parisien et al., "Abrupt."

of enculturated settler-colonial fire suppression.[11] As the McDougall Creek wildfire burned, West Kelowna fire chief Jason Brolund told reporters, "We fought 100 years' worth of fires all in one night."[12] This widely quoted remark is an apt description of the link between historic fire absence under regimes of colonial fire suppression and the explosive return of out-of-control fires to those landscapes.

There are many reasons to do public fire history specifically in the Okanagan Valley. Most of the Okanagan Valley is part of the "wildland-urban interface," the fire manager's term for areas where undeveloped landscapes meet human communities. These are areas where, without proper management actions, uncontrolled wildfires can cause the most damage to human lives, health, property, and other values.[13] The Okanagan Valley in particular is home to some of the fastest-growing areas in British Columbia and the host of a significant summer tourist economy.[14] People live in and visit the Okanagan with different levels of awareness of the historical roles of fire on the landscape and differing abilities to escape the dangers of uncontrolled wildfire outbreaks. The unhoused, poor, and other vulnerable populations (including the elderly, pregnant women, and those with pre-existing health conditions) are particularly threatened by the adverse impacts of uncontrollable wildfires; the resources to protect people and property are deployed unevenly. People have differing abilities to insure their properties and ensure their safety from encroaching wildfires and high levels of wildfire smoke.[15] These are important considerations in a valley where expensive properties continue to be developed on the flammable hillsides where fires have been suppressed and forests encroach, and extensive resources are deployed

[11] As Parisian et al., "Abrupt," 8, write: "Just as British Columbians became accustomed to the relatively low burn rates of the late 20th century, they are now confronted with a harsh reality of more frequent years of intense and prolonged wildfire activity." On the history of fire suppression in the southern interior of British Columbia, see Pyne, *Awful Splendor*; Parminter, "Burning Alternatives Panel"; Nikolakis and Roberts, "Wildfire Governance"; and Copes-Gerbitz et al., "Situating Indigenous Knowledge."

[12] Benjamen Shingler, "Different Cities, Different Wildfires: How 2 Canadian Cities Are Fighting Back," CBC News, 18 August 2023.

[13] Johnston and Flannigan, "Mapping Canadian Wildland"; Abbott and Chapman, "Addressing the New Normal."

[14] Between 2016 and 2021, the Central Okanagan district saw a 14 percent population increase. That's nearly double the population growth rate for the province during the same time period. See Winston Sezto, "The Fastest Growing Population Centres in Canada Are in BC – But They're Not in Metro Vancouver," CBC News, 9 February 2022. Data from Statistics Canada's "2021 Census of Population," InterVISTAS, *2018 Economic Impact of Tourism in the Greater Kelowna Area*, 22 September 2020.

[15] Asiyanbi and Davidsen, "Governing Wildfire Risk." See also Verhaegue, Feltes, and Stacey, "Nagwediżk'an Gwanes̓ Gangu"; McGee, "Evacuating First Nations"; and D'Evelyn et al., "Wildfire."

to protect them.[16] The valley has been the site of significant interface fires that influenced wildfire management across the province. These were the 1994 Garnet Fire[17] and the 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park Fire,[18] both featured in the podcast.[19] In the following decades, large and uncontrollable wildfire seasons have continued to strike the Okanagan, as predicted under the heating and drying influences of climate change. The fire season of 2021, featured in the podcast, was one of the biggest fire seasons in the Okanagan watershed in a century.[20] That summer also saw the small town of Lytton burn down just a few hours away in the southern interior after "heat dome" temperatures hit record high marks.[21] Raising public awareness about wildfire danger is particularly important in the Okanagan as members of the public grapple with fire seasons that will not be suppressed.

While the podcast addresses the dangers of these wildfire seasons, it also points to uses of fire as a long-standing regenerative force and to light burning as an ecological, cultural, and wildfire-preparedness practice in the valley. Over thousands of years, fires applied by Syilx and Secwépemc Peoples and sparked by lightning have driven the biodiversity

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[16] B.A. Blackwell and Associates, "Community Wildfire." In this podcast, forester and fire management consultant John Davies speaks frankly about the need for more proactive fuels management and prescribed fire in an era of increasing wildfire risk. There is a crisis driven by the build-up of fuels; dense and homogenous forest plantings of lodgepole pine affected by mountain pine beetle; and the construction of neighbourhoods and homes without fire safety in mind. He says, "We're at that point where we're paying for it." From Episode 3, "The lighter footprint of fire," *Listening to Fire Knowledges in and around the Okanagan Valley*, minute 00:23:13.

[17] The *Garnet Fire Review*, issued by the Ministry of Forests after the fire, called it "BC's worst interface fire ever" and acknowledged that, prior to policies of systematic fire suppression, wildfires would have occurred every eight to ten years in the Okanagan. The report also notes, correctly and ominously, that: "There will be many interface fires in the future, and some will be more severe and costly than the Garnet Fire." See Ministry of Forests, *Garnet Fire Review*, March 1995.

[18] The Filmon Report issued by a provincial review team explicitly linked the severe wildfires to the build-up of fuels – densification of trees and organic debris accumulating on the forest floor – caused by decades of fire suppression. See Filmon, *Firestorm 2003*. These 1994 and 2003 fire seasons, including these two fires in the Okanagan Valley, instigated provincial reviews and resulted in organizational shifts, as contextualized in Copes-Gerbitz, Hagerman, and Daniels, "Transforming Fire Governance."

[19] Joe Gilchrist on the Garnet Fire in Episode 1, "Pick your poison, or pick your medicine," *Listening to Fire Knowledges in and around the Okanagan Valley*, minute 00:35:38. Sharon Thesen on the Okanagan Mountain Park Fire in Episode 2, "Challenging, beautiful bioregion," *Listening to Fire Knowledges in and around the Okanagan Valley*, minute 00:04:34.

[20] Based on my analysis of burned area within the Okanagan watershed between 1920 and 2021, with historical fire data from the BC Wildfire Service and the Okanagan Valley watershed boundary compiled from Freshwater Atlas polygons by members of the Living with Wildfire project team. See Burr, "Listening to Fire Naturecultures," 44.

[21] White et al., "Unprecedented Pacific Northwest Heatwave."

of this place, by maintaining grasslands, clearing forest understories, and promoting nutrient-rich landscape regeneration.[22] The podcast features stories from the history of cultural burning, its benefits, and its policing by colonial institutions. We can hear the crackle of a contemporary cultural burn in the adjacent Nicola Valley in the first episode and a prescribed burn in Vernon in the third. The podcast explicitly draws connections between historical fire seasons, the histories of the suppression of Indigenous fire stewardship knowledge, and settler-colonial environmental governance. Naming contemporary structures of fire suppression and institutional fire management "colonial" draws attention to their historical construction and contingency amid specific power struggles over land governance, the illegalization of First Nations burning practices, and colonial capitalism and timber economies. Fire scholars from a number of disciplines have drawn attention to this history in the Pacific Northwest and advocated for the expansion of Indigenous-led cultural fire use and informed management.[23] Listening to Syilx, Secwépemc, and Nlaka'pamux fire stewardship knowledges in this research shows that these Indigenous fire knowledges must be *practised* to be maintained. Cultural burning, or "good fire," can only happen if policies and local communities support these practices and thereby enable people to use fire on the land in ways long demonstrated to promote biodiversity and less destructive summer wildfire seasons.[24] The localized specificities of settler-colonial fire management and Indigenous fire stewardship storied in this podcast can usefully be interpreted alongside scholarship in critical Indigenous ecology,[25] which examines the continuance of Indigenous knowledge systems amid colonial laws, science, and land claims.

As important context for the Indigenous knowledges included in this work, I conducted this research as a settler scholar living temporarily in the Okanagan, and Syilx communities were not involved in the design of this research project, which was not designed to investigate or share any new Indigenous fire stewardship knowledge.[26] As I share in a

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[22] Allison and Michel, "Helping Our Land Heal"; Simmons, "British Columbia's Indigenous People"; Armstrong, "Constructing Indigeneity"; Turner, "Time to Burn"; Pogue, "Humans."

[23] For example, Nikolakis and Roberts, "Wildfire Governance"; Copes-Gerbitz, Hagerman, and Daniels, "Transforming Fire Governance"; and Hoffman et al., "Right to Burn."

[24] Hoffman et al., "Right to Burn."

[25] For example, Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought"; Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*; and Todd, "Fossil Fuels."

[26] Wonderful examples of Indigenous-led fire research projects and collaborations between academics and Indigenous communities exist; for example, Dickson-Hoyle et al., "Walking on Two Legs"; Copes-Gerbitz, Hagerman, and Daniels, "Situating Indigenous Knowledge."

conversation about research methods in a new epilogue of the podcast produced for *BC Studies*, I reached out to many kinds of fire experts to request interviews for this podcast, including Syilx Fire Keepers and Knowledge Keepers whose expertise is central to this research, which is centred on unceded, ancestral Syilx Okanagan territory. The Syilx experts I reached out to declined to be interviewed for the podcast.[27] The feminist research methods that I practised in my work with the AMP Lab at UBC-Okanagan included a commitment to establishing "ongoing consent" with participants,[28] and, in creating public-facing work, it was essential to give potential participants many opportunities to say no. The fire knowledge that Syilx experts have published and shared elsewhere was foundational to my understanding of fire in the Okanagan, and those reading this summary and listening to this scholarly podcast for information about Indigenous fire stewardship should directly credit the Indigenous fire stewards I have cited for their knowledge.[29] It was my job to responsibly craft an audio story about the Okanagan that engaged with published Indigenous expertise, acknowledged absences, and presented itself as a partial story conducted within the constraints and strengths of my positionality, methods, and research timeline. The podcast does include a clip of an interview with Syilx Fire Keeper Pierre Kruger from the *Good Fire Podcast*, used with permission.

Finally, I want to comment on this work of podcasting as a feminist practice, which I elaborate on in my conversation with Dr. Karis Shearer

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[27] I had one informative conversation with a Syilx fire expert on background. I also participated in two public-facing learning opportunities organized by Syilx experts: (1) a plant use walking tour led by Wild Rose Cultural Practices in partnership with the Kelowna Museum; and (2) a tour of the Sncewips Heritage Museum led by Coralee Miller and informal conversations about Syilx fire stewardship with leaders there. These interactions were informative and provided me with a way to learn from Syilx experts at events organized by the community instead of meeting only on terms set by me as a scholar.

[28] Read more about the AMP Lab at https://amplab.ok.ubc.ca.

[29] I have been told that Syilx and Secwépemc fire knowledges are often passed down in oral stories and lessons; in many cases, Knowledge Keepers intentionally restrict the information that is released to the public and published in colonial and Eurocentric academic traditions in order to safeguard important communal knowledge. As Armstrong, "Living from the Land," writes of Syilx field-harvest practices: "Few such best-practice methods regarding customs known to most Syilx harvesters even in the modern day are in the published records of research." This means that my reliance on mostly written materials will necessarily leave out important fire knowledge and context. Important published sources include Allison and Michel, "Helping Our Land"; Armstrong, *Native Perspectives*; Armstrong, "Constructing Indigeneity"; Armstrong, "Living from the Land"; Armstrong et al., *We Get Our Living*; Armstrong et al., *Okanagan Women's Voices*; Blackstock and McAllister, "First Nations Perspectives"; FireSmart Canada, *Blazing the Trail*; Hawkes, *McTaggart-Cowan*; Ignace and Ignace, *Secwépemc People*; Louis, *Q'sapi*; Simmons, "British Columbia's Indigenous People"; Turner et al., *Ethnobotany of the Okanagan-Colville*; Turner, "Time to Burn"; and the three interviews from the *Good Fire Podcast* listed in the bibliography.

in the new epilogue. Scholarly podcasts, or "academic podcasts," can differ widely in their form and content. Some are explicitly feminist.[30] This scholarly podcast is a work of interdisciplinary "research-creation": a way of designing non-traditional academic projects that can be guided by a problem and researcher values instead of by particular disciplinary approaches.[31] Scholarly podcasting has been a way for me to enact values and methodologies that I situate in plural feminist traditions of scholarship.[32] I think of *listening* as a centring conceit of this work: it is a container for these feminist values I deploy; it is the way I engaged in my interviews and that audiences can engage with this academic podcast; and it is an important disposition for shaping collaborative fire knowledges and practices. My recorded conversations situate me as the researcher in this project and allow me to share my fire research in a dialogic and relational format contextualized by my background research and in a way that I hope invites further contributions and publicly engaged solutions. As a contribution to the public humanities, many of my full interviews have been archived where consent was given on the project website.[33]

I crafted this podcast so that the details of life with fire in and around the Okanagan Valley could come together with nuance and listenability for public audiences. Centred on fourteen oral history and expert interviews and two field recordings,[34] what coalesces in this sonic scholarship is a portrait of a valley with a long-standing relationship

[30] For example, Hannah McGregor's "Secret Feminist Agenda" is explicitly feminist and was the pilot scholarly podcast for an open-peer review process with Wilfrid Laurier University Press, https://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/Scholarly-Podcasting-Open-Peer-Review/Secret-Feminist-Agenda.

[31] Loveless, *How to Make Art*; Fitzpatrick, *Generous Thinking*; McGregor, *Sentimental Education*; McHugh, "Oral History."

[32] In my thesis background document, I discuss six specific areas in which I contextualize the work of the podcast as being part of feminist scholarly traditions: (1) researching with awareness of power and theorizing from marginalized perspectives; (2) storying fire history as a "more-than-human" history that acknowledges human imbrication in non-human ecologies; (3) foregrounding relationality, embodiment, and emotion in research practice; (4) listening across and beyond disciplines; (5) conducting local, place-based research; and (6) connecting research to practice, communal values, and to possibilities for action. For more, see Burr, "Listening to Fire Naturecultures," 70.

[33] Visit www.listeningtofirepodcast.ca.

[34] The podcast is supported by background research into fire history and fire management challenges of the region and my local archival research. I used archival research to explore local fire histories. Although this ended up being a small part of the podcast, I was especially interested in locating oral histories and archival recordings related to fire in the Okanagan Valley. I visited these archives between July 2021 and January 2022. See Greater Vernon Museum and Archives, Vernon, BC; Oliver Archives, Oliver, BC; Enderby Archives, Enderby, BC; Armstrong Spallumcheen Museum and Art Gallery Archives, Armstrong, BC; Royal BC Archives, Victoria, BC; UBC-Vancouver Special Collections, Vancouver, BC; and UBC-Okanagan Special Collections, Kelowna, BC.

to burning. It brings the fire histories and challenges that have long circulated among Indigenous cultural burning practitioners and fire scholars to a wider audience. Public engagement with these histories can open up possibilities for new land relations in and around the Okanagan Valley and in other fire-prone landscapes.

PERMISSIONS

This project required ethics approval and fully adhered to the procedures of the University of British Columbia Okanagan Behavioural Research Ethics Board, certificate number H21-01618. The podcast includes a clip from the *Good Fire Podcast* with permission from host Amy Cardinal Christianson; a clip from Amy Thiessen's digital edition of Sharon Thesen's "The Fire" with permission from Amy Thiessen; music from the Lent Fraser Wall Trio with permission from John Lent; and clips of the Westland television series with permission from UBC Open Collections. The project was supported in part by the Government of Canada's New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF) through UBC Okanagan's "Living with Wildfire" Project, NFRFE-2018-01662.

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