

BC Studies Epilogue Transcript and Show Notes: Listening to Fire Knowledges in and around the Okanagan Valley

Title: Reflecting on Feminist Methods and “Colonial Presence”:
A Dialogue with Dr. Karis Shearer

[00:00:05]

Karis Shearer:

[Music begins]

Okay. Hi, Judee.

[00:00:10]

Judee Burr:

Hi Karis. Thanks for being here.

[00:00:12]

Karis Shearer:

It's a pleasure.

[00:00:15]

Judee Burr:

I wanted to start by giving some context. It's been about a year and a half since I finished this research and published this scholarly podcast on podcasting platforms. And over the past few months, I have been working with the editors of *BC Studies* to publish this work in a forthcoming issue of the journal. I reached out to you to ask if you'd be willing to reflect with me on the making of this podcast and on some of the ongoing questions that the work raised during the peer review process. I'm so grateful you were willing. As one of my mentors during this project, it feels quite fitting for me to include our dialogue in the work.

[00:00:51]

Karis Shearer:

It's great to have a chance to reflect on this project again, and I want to say that I really appreciate the invitation.

[Music ends]

[00:00:58]

Judee Burr:

Thanks so much. I wanted to start by introducing you to our listeners. Dr. Karis Shearer is the associate vice-principal research and innovation, *pro tem* at UBC Okanagan, the principal's research chair in Digital Arts and Humanities, associate professor of English, and director of the AMP Lab. Her research and teaching focus on literary audio, the literary event, the digital archive, book history, and women's labour within poetry communities. I've been so grateful to learn from you and your work, Karis, as I conducted this research in UBC Okanagan, its Digital Arts and Humanities Program, and worked with you at the AMP Lab. To jump directly into reflecting on the podcast – I think you have some questions for me that we've prepared for this conversation.

[00:01:46]

Karis Shearer:

I do. As we prepared for the conversation, you asked me to help you bring some of the questions that were raised in the peer review process into this epilogue and to share some of our ongoing reflections a year after the original publication of the podcast. We decided we wanted to briefly reflect on two things. One, the making of the podcast, especially as it relates to feminist methodologies and whose voices are included and not included in the interviews. And, two: the importance of thinking of fire history as part of a history of colonialism in the midst of ongoing disastrous fire seasons.

[00:02:21]

Judee Burr:

That's right.

[00:02:22]

Karis Shearer:

So, to start with the making of the podcast, one of the things that you've been hearing that listeners value about the podcast is how many different voices and kinds of expertise are represented in your interviews. Can you talk about how you selected these interviewees and what that has to do with feminist research methods?

[00:02:42]

Judee Burr:

These are questions I'm really glad to have the opportunity to reflect on. To start with some thoughts about my research design and methods, you and I talked so much about methods while I was engaged in this project. When I was seeking interviewees, I was reaching out to experts specifically, and I was especially hoping to bring in forms of expertise that are underrepresented in fire scholarship. This podcast was designed to be public from the beginning, which meant, among other things, that I wanted to take care in how I selected and represented my interviewees in the project. I decided to focus on expert interviews only – people who had spoken publicly about fire previously or contributed another relevant perspective on the Okanagan from their position of expertise. This was a way to accomplish my project of sharing interdisciplinary fire knowledges in a publicly accessible format, and also protecting my project participants in terms of the kinds of information I was asking them to share with the public. This might sound like pretty familiar journalistic practice to listeners on the one hand, but as

academics listening will know we have a lot of institutional ethics processes required by universities, and we take care when deciding not to anonymize research collaborators or participants in our work. Beyond basic institutional requirements, there's a deeper scholarship on feminist methods that you and I talked a lot about while I was doing this work. And I learned a lot by working with the AMP Lab, which is the feminist digital humanities lab that you direct at UBC Okanagan. In the AMP Lab, we spent a lot of time designing research methods with feminist values in mind, methods that work to acknowledge power dynamics between scholars and participants, methods that acknowledge risks to both scholars and participants of doing public humanities research, among other things.

[00:04:28]

Karis Shearer:

I think that's really helpful context for your listeners. And I'm reminded of just how well your work aligns with the work that we do in the AMP Lab, even though, you know, my research, as you know, is focused on poetry and archives. You know, both of us are thinking about power, institutions, and the way in which those institutions historically privilege white-cis men, and the work that interventions that feminist scholars make to amplify voices that are not typically heard. So I really appreciate the connection. One of the peer reviewers specifically wanted to hear why you didn't interview a Syilx Okanagan expert directly for the podcast, given that Syilx fire stewardship knowledge is so important to this research. Can you say more about that?

[00:05:13]

Judee Burr:

Yes, that was such a great question from that reviewer. They commented that they were appreciating the references to publications by Syilx experts in my bibliography,ⁱⁱ which listeners can find published in the print edition of BC Studies. But this reviewer was left wondering why no Syilx voices aside from the short clip that we do here in the podcast of Pierre Kruger from the Good Fire Podcastⁱⁱⁱ – that was a clip I used with their permission. The reviewer asked what involvement if any, did Syilx communities have in this process? These are really important questions. And the reviewer is exactly right to note that the vast majority of the Okanagan Valley is the ancestral unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan people, and that more Syilx perspectives would be a powerful addition to this project. During my research Syilx fire experts were some of the people I was most interested in talking to, and I reached out to a number of public-facing Syilx experts to request interviews. And the people that I reached out to ultimately declined to be interviewed for this project. Importantly, I designed this project with the awareness that I was a settler living temporarily in the Okanagan on a relatively short research timeframe. So it was never intended to bring new Indigenous knowledge into the public eye. It was intended to include expertise that communities had already decided to share. I was reaching out to people specifically in their capacity as public-facing experts who had already spoken or written publicly about fire knowledge.

And as I reached out to potential participants, I was using that process of ongoing consent, a feminist method of care that we practise in the AMP Lab, which was giving

people many opportunities to say no: to say no to being interviewed, no to using parts of their interview in the work, and no to participating if they changed their mind. And so, with that kind of framework in mind, knowing that I only had two years to work on this project, it made complete sense to me when I received kind and clear rejections from Syilx experts who didn't have the interest or capacity to participate in the project, or did not deem their knowledge and stories appropriate for a temporary settler researcher like me to include in a public format like this. So it was my job, as I saw it, to responsibly craft an audio story about the Okanagan that acknowledged those absences and presented itself as a partial story, not an exhaustive one. And I think the humility of acknowledging what is missing even as I celebrate the important voices that I did gather together here is a way to encourage ongoing questions, conversations, and more scholarship that can support healthier ways of living with fire in the Okanagan. And my interview and conversations with Secwépemc and Nlaka'pamux Fire Keeper and former wildland firefighter Joe Gilchrist was an important portrayal of Indigenous fire stewardship knowledge and firefighting knowledge from the southern interior of BC. But, ultimately, that conversation took me outside of the Okanagan Valley to Nlaka'pamux territory in the Nicola Valley. I eventually made the subtitle of the podcast "in and *around* the Okanagan Valley" to reflect its fluctuating scope.

And one last thing I wanted to underscore in this kind of larger thinking about interviewees, is the fact that the people I interviewed come from different positions of influence and power when it comes to changing ways of living with fire. Sometimes I think that point gets obscured when I talk about this work and think about "the *many* forms" of expertise that are here, or "the *many* ways of knowing" that this work celebrates. I think it is important to remember that they're not all on equal footing. And my work to put them together was not intended to erase the power dynamics and incommensurabilities that I think we can still hear at work operating between them in the podcast.

[00:09:02]

Karis Shearer:

One of the things I hear a lot in your work, and what you've just said, is about building or working at the speed of trust within the constraint of a degree which is, you know, obviously a challenge. And I think, you know, your attention to boundaries and the word "no" is also commendable. We talked about public scholarship as a feminist practice as well. How did that inform your work?

[00:09:31]

Judee Burr:

Yes. One of the main scholars that helped me see academic podcasting as a possibility is Dr. Hannah McGregor, who's a professor of publishing at SFU and the creator of the peer-reviewed podcast *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Hannah was also one of my supervisors for my research assistantship with the *Spoken Web* podcast, which is a podcast I was working on while I was doing the research for this project. And not only did Hannah's work give me published examples of the kind of deeply theorised, emotional relational scholarship that I wanted to create in this fire research, but she

helped me deepen my understanding of podcasting as a feminist practice. Something that Hannah talks about on *Secret Feminist Agenda* and in her lectures about academic podcasting is how the collaboration, conversation, feminist theoretical grounding, and the public-facing nature of her podcasting projects all makes them into powerful modes of feminist research. And when I was making this podcast, I was also learning from a lot of feminist theory that I was reading. Not just hegemonic white feminism that erases difference, but plural feminist traditions, including understandings of engaged scholarship laid out by black radical feminists like bell hooks and Audrey Lorde, and Indigenous feminist work by Jeannette Armstrong and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. This was one of the gifts of doing this research in an interdisciplinary program in the digital arts and humanities. And for me, this podcast emerged from learning from those feminist values. I intentionally decided not to spend a lot of time talking about those theoretical foundations in the audio work itself, in the body of the podcast that listeners have just heard. Just so that the story of the podcast remains focused on the material details of fire history and challenges. But my values are implicitly structuring that work, and I talk about them here and write about them elsewhere.

[00:11:25]

Karis Shearer:

Yeah, and I'm reminded of how you surface them so beautifully in the written part of the thesis that comes with this.^{iv} I want to turn the conversation to the connections between fire and colonialism and why making these connections is so important. Last summer, the summer of 2023, we experienced another record-breaking fire season in so-called Canada, in BC, in the Okanagan. The McDougall Creek wildfire in Kelowna occurred almost exactly twenty years after the 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park fire, which features centrally in your podcast through the story of Sharon Thesen.

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Judee Burr:

And – I know you were there, Karis, during this fire. Which I was watching with alarm on the news. Do you have any reflections to share, having been there during this historic wildfire event?

[00:12:14]

Karis Shearer:

I do. I mean, I think – as you know, Judee, I've lived in the Okanagan Valley for twelve years now. And I've seen a number of fires from a distance. This was the first time that I had ever lived through something that felt very, very close. I watched the fire when it was still on the west side. And obviously worried very much about the people whose houses were under threat and structures that were eventually lost. I have never had a fire so close to, you know, where evacuation zones or evacuation alert zones were so close to my own house. I was very fortunate in the sense that I wasn't evacuated and was able to put up people who were evacuated from their houses. I didn't lose my house and I feel conscious of the kind of privilege that I have as someone who was outside of that zone, who had the means to leave if necessary.

[00:13:20]

Judee Burr:

Thanks for sharing those reflections. The 2023 fire season was humbling for people in the Okanagan, for people all across Canada, who experienced evacuations and endangerment. Like I said, it was really disorienting for me to have worked on this project and this research with you and to have been living in the Okanagan collaborating with many people on interdisciplinary fire research – but then to be ultimately watching this historic fire happen on the news from the safety of the coast where I'm now living on Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Watuth territory in Vancouver. So, I was very worried about everyone and I'm really glad that you're safe.

[00:14:07]

Karis Shearer:

To reflect on this in the context of the podcast, can you say more about why it's important to understand fire management as part of the history of colonialism as we continue to experience destructive fire seasons today?

[00:14:19]

Judee Burr:

Every life-threatening fire is another reminder that there is urgency in these questions of how to live well with fire for communities, as we're confronting the legacies of land management in these places that burn and as climate change will continue to fuel big fire seasons. Connecting fire history to colonial history in the Okanagan and in so-called British Columbia draws our attention to the power relations at work in fire governance and fire management. Settler colonial governance structures and legal systems implemented from the late nineteenth century to the present day have attempted to dictate how fire should burn on these lands claimed by the province of British Columbia. They have attempted to dictate who's allowed to light fires and criminalized those who have resisted these colonial dictates. These legal systems have been deliberately constructed for colonial and capitalist reasons, and their ongoing "colonial presence"^v – to quote critical archival scholar Ann Stoler – impacts how fire can be managed and put to use today.

I think when listening to your reflections on this disastrous fire in the Okanagan, when thinking about other fire disasters, this kind of historical awareness reminds all of us who care about building a healthier future on fire-prone landscapes, that there are other ways to live with fire. Command and control fire suppression has not been the only way that people have lived with fire in the Okanagan. The histories and ongoing practices of Indigenous Fire Stewardship show us that. The history of how fire suppression became entrenched as a way to protect colonial property and timber profits shows us how these modes of relating to fire is tied to specific decisions to use forests as a globalized commodity instead of primarily as local places of sustenance, connection, and care. None of this is to disregard the important work of putting fires out when they threaten communities, when they threaten our homes. But it's to give historical context to the land management situations that we find ourselves in that are making these fires so disastrous. Understanding this history for me and including those connections in the

podcast turns my attention to the ongoing strategies of Indigenous fire experts in the southern interior of BC, including Syilx, Secwépemc, and Nlaka'pamux leaders, and also to ongoing forms of settler colonial land governance that make changing dominant socio-ecological relations so difficult.

[00:16:44]

Karis Shearer:

Yeah. I believe one of your reviewers wanted to hear more about the political, bureaucratic, and economic barriers to Indigenous fire stewardship today. What's preventing Indigenous experts from putting more good fire on the ground?

[00:16:56]

Judee Burr:

My hope was that making these details of life with fire available to a wide audience would help motivate all of us to have those conversations. So it's a great question. I can recommend a great paper published by Kira Hoffman and her co-authors, published in 2022, called "The Right to Burn: Barriers and Opportunities for Indigenous-Led Fire Stewardship in Canada."^{vi} So that's a Canada-wide analysis, but they do identify five key barriers that I see as important for supporting cultural burning in the Okanagan and the southern interior. Those five barriers to putting more good fire on the ground, are: one, key decision-makers not understanding the relationships between Indigenous people and fire; two, the way colonial governments have the final say about wildfire management decision-making on Crown land, which takes authority away from First Nations; three, a lack of training programs on cultural burning and accreditation opportunities outside of colonial governments; four, the risks and costs of fire insurance and liability when putting good fire on the ground; and, five, the need for funding and capacity to revitalize Indigenous fire stewardship on lands that have been reshaped by colonial mismanagement.

[00:18:13]

Karis Shearer:

That sounds like a really helpful paper.

[00:18:15]

Judee Burr:

It was really helpful to me. I wanted to also mention another paper by Marc-André Parisien and his co-authors. It's called "Abrupt Climate-Induced Increase in Wildfires in British Columbia since the mid 2000s."^{vii} It was published just last year in 2023. And it's about the more fire-conducive conditions faced by our communities in BC under climate change. I want to read a quote from that paper.

They write: "Though daunting, the current conjecture in BC provides a strong impetus for accelerating efforts toward fire adaptation and mitigation that protect human communities and maintain essential ecosystem services within a broader climate change adaptation context. To take on this task, many tools are available: landscape fire management plans enabling prescribed burning, Indigenous-led cultural burning,

fuel mitigation treatments, optimization of forest harvesting and species conversions, as well as revised urban planning and building codes and practices, and enhance preparedness and resiliency in fire and emergency organizations.”

They continue: “It is becoming evident that we require place-based efforts across firescapes that are both creative and sustained to confront the magnitude of the wildfire challenge in different socio-economic and ecological situations across BC.”

So, I read that because in reflecting on that quote and that call for action – this is something that I see coming from a lot of different kinds of fire scholarship. And this podcast was one attempt to contribute to a place-based effort and understanding to improve our relationship with fire-prone landscapes. I hope listeners in and around the Okanagan heard something resonant in this collection of expert interviews and personal oral histories of life with fire. And I hope as conditions continue to change in the valley, they feel a little bit more prepared to talk about the role of fire in their communities after having listened to this work.

[00:20:12]

Karis Shearer:

Thanks for that, Judee. As I’m listening to what you’ve said in our conversation, I’m really struck by the importance of doing public humanities work – the fact that you’ve chosen a different format, which is to say, traditional scholarship tends to be published in written form, in expert papers that are not necessarily accessible to the wider public. And so in choosing a podcast format, you are first amplifying voices that aren’t traditionally heard in scholarship, you’re rebalancing. But you’re also reaching a different audience. You’re also distributing and circulating that in a way that is free, and much more widely accessible – which feels like a really important intervention in this topic in particular.

[00:21:02]

Judee Burr:

I really appreciate that. That was definitely an important aim of this project. And when I think about why this is so suited for a work in the public humanities vein, what messages I kind of want the listener who is in the Okanagan, or in a fire-prone landscape to take away, I’m just thinking about the current status quo –

[Music begins^{viii}]

of ignoring fire until these huge summer wildfires catch communities off guard, it doesn’t have to be the way forward. That’s one of the main lessons I hope listeners are taking from this, that we are living in fire-prone landscapes year-round, even when they’re not burning. All of life on these landscapes can benefit from more of the right kind of fire at the right times of year, instead of these huge conflagrations during the summer. And I think this means thinking about whose interests dominate land governance decisions to think back about those reflections on colonialism and what it means for that to still be a relevant conversation. What does it mean to re-center the long-term interests of human

and the more-than-human communities in these places, and to learn from Indigenous fire stewards in that regard. If we who live in fire-prone places think about fire management and land care year-round and recognize the fire-prone nature of these ecosystems instead of reacting and reacting during these big wildfire disasters, it is possible to change dominant practices and ways of relating to the land and to each other. And those changes are already starting to happen.

[00:22:44]

Karis Shearer:

Judee, thank you.

[00:22:45]

Judee Burr:

Thank you so much, Karis.

[Music ends]

Show Notes

ⁱ “Set the Tip Jar” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/121831>.

ⁱⁱ Tammy Allison and Henry Michel summarized the cultural burning knowledge former Penticton Indian Band Fire Keeper Annie Kruger shared at a 2003 workshop, writing: “*Okanagan People, according to Elders, exist in a reciprocal relationship with the land. The land provides all foods, medicines, shelter and material goods needed for survival; in return, Okanagans are responsible to be caretakers of the land ... Fire has been a major component of this responsibility for Okanagans ... Traditional Okanagan burning practices were regularly maintained until about thirty or forty years ago. Elders speak of forest conditions then that are far different from what we have become accustomed to today ... Fire Keepers visited an area on a regular basis to determine the frequency and prescription for burning. Today, only certain families maintain the practice in small confined areas such as on Indian Reserves and, in many cases, even this level of burning has been discouraged. Being a Fire Keeper is a responsibility of lifelong learning passed down from generation to generation.*” Tammy Allison and Henry Michel, “Helping Our Land Heal: A Cultural Perspective on Fire and Forest Restoration,” *BC Grasslands: Magazine of the Grasslands Conservation Council of British Columbia*, October 2004; Syilx Okanagan fire stewardship teachings are also mentioned in: Ellen Simmons, “British Columbia’s Indigenous People: The Burning Issue,” *Journal of Ecosystems and Management*, FORREX Forum for Research and Extension in Natural Resources 13, no. 2 (2012): 1–2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amy Cardinal Christianson and Matthew Kristoff (hosts), “Indigenous Fire Keepers Workshop in Merritt, BC, Canada, with Pierre Kruger,” *Good Fire*, accessed 5 November 2021, <https://yourforestpodcast.com/good-fire-podcast/2019/9/2/interior-fire-keepers-worshope-in-merritt-bc-canada-with-pierre-krueger>.

^{iv} Judith Burr, “Listening to Fire Naturecultures: A Feminist Academic Podcast of Fire Knowledges in and around the Okanagan Valley” (master’s thesis, Interdisciplinary Studies, University of British Columbia, 2022), <https://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0416479>.

^v Ann Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, 4.

^{vi} Kira M. Hoffman et al., “The Right to Burn: Barriers and Opportunities for Indigenous-Led Fire Stewardship in Canada,” *Facets* 7 (2022): 464–81, <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0062>.

^{vii} Marc-André Parisien et al., “Abrupt, Climate-Induced Increase in Wildfires in British Columbia since the Mid-2000s,” *Communications Earth & Environment* 4, no. 1 (5 September 2023): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-023-00977-1>.

^{viii} “Set the Tip Jar” by Blue Dot Sessions, <https://app.sessions.blue/browse/track/121831>.