

Research Notes:

2023 Geographic Indigenous Futures of the Salish Sea Symposium

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Abstract:

This paper provides a report on a 2023 symposium regarding Indigenous geographies in the Salish Sea bioregion. The presenters spoke on topics ranging from animal movement analysis and quantitative research to the permeability of boundaries in the Salish Sea. Through their talks, the participants provided potential glimpses into what a ‘geographic Indigenous future’ of the Salish Sea might look like. In this article, the presenters reflect on their contributions, and further interrogate what this future may mean for the broader region, given the ongoing effects of climate change. The article also speaks to the creation of a research group at the University of Victoria which is devoted to these efforts.

Introduction:

RDK Herman (2008) wrote that the critical component of Indigenous geographies centers on their interconnectedness with land (and water). Indigenous geographies differentiate themselves from broader European/Western conceptions of geography by recognizing that we relate to the spaces surrounding us, and that space is deeply embedded with meaning (Herman, 2008; Wong et. al, 2020). Language, culture, history, and emotions are all part of the land. This suggests that even our *love* of a place can guide how we relate to it.

In July 2023, a group of academic researchers, students, and community members began a conversation about what can happen when they are brought together to share their love of a place/space. The result, the 1st Geographic Indigenous Futures symposium, "The Salish Sea,"

sparked meaningful connections among its attendees and led to further conversations and collaboration. We, the Symposium speakers, present this progress report to share what happened and what has happened since.

We begin this report by briefly introducing readers to the Salish Sea region, the ways in which boundaries shape its lands and waters, and the ways in which the communities and Indigenous nations that call the region home contend with and transcend these boundaries. We then briefly attend to how anthropogenic climate change/crisis has placed and will continue to place environments and spaces within the region at risk.

We then introduce the research collective that hosted the first Geographic Indigenous Futures symposium, discussing how the lab's values guided its work in hosting the event. We then outline the speakers' contributions to the event and reflect on how the various foci they brought to the Symposium reflect the ability of the Salish Sea and its people, particularly Indigenous nations, to continue to move beyond boundaries when relating to the land.

Finally, we contemplate the broader lessons of what we can take away from this event. We reflect on how we can continue our work towards creating better futures for Indigenous nations and their environmental relations in the Salish Sea and beyond.

Introduction to the trans-boundary Salish Sea region:



Figure 1: Map of the Salish Sea region. (Aquila Flower/Western Washington University, 2021)

The Salish Sea is a body of inland/marginal Pacific Ocean waters, broadly defined as including the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the Strait of Georgia, Puget Sound, and the waters surrounding the Gulf and San Juan Islands. The waters are shared between the United States and Canada, and include the province of British Columbia and the State of Washington.

According to the Salish Sea Institute at Western Washington University (Salish Sea Institute, 2024) the name Salish Sea was coined in the late 1980s to tie together the different areas of these waters based on shared cultural and environmental traits, including shared cultural relationships with the water among Coast Salish nations, and shared ecosystems between the different branches of the Sea.

The naming of the Salish Sea also points to the ways in which understandings and connections to the broader waters of the Salish Sea can transcend political boundaries imposed upon these lands by settler colonial structures and legal orders.

Part of this comes from the multitudes of Indigenous nations that live on and near the Sea, including (in no particular order) the Lummi Nation, Tulalip Nation, WSANEC Nation, Songhees Nation, Esquimalt Nation, T'Souke Nation, Pacheedaht Nation, Makah Nation, S'Klallam Nation, Suquamish Nation, Muckleshoot Nation, Musqueam Nation, Sechelt Nation, and many others (Native-Land.ca, 2024).

Their lands and territories overlap with each other and the broader lands of the transboundary region, obscuring the colonial boundaries placed upon them and impacting their relationships with the land to the present day (Norman & Cohen, 2016; Jones & van der Flier, 2021).

Climate/Environmental Change and the Salish Sea:

Within geographic and, more broadly, environmental literature, it is no secret or surprise—we are entering a period of rapid climate change, primarily driven by human factors. Lewis and Maslin (2015) define this period as the Anthropocene. Others, such as Moore (2014; 2016) or Donna Haraway (2015), define it as the 'Capitolocene,' or 'Plantationocene,' to point the finger of blame away from humanity writ large and towards the culprits of capitalism and imperialism.

Regardless of how it is defined, the effects of this rapidly growing climate crisis can be observed here in the Salish Sea. In recent years, the region has seen damage, destruction, and disruption from a variety of causes. These include wildfires, disastrous floods and landslides driven by rainfall from atmospheric rivers, alongside increasing pollution and damage to the aquatic and land ecosystems that comprise the Salish Sea region (Western Washington University, 2024). Indigenous nations in the broader region are, and have been, often front and center regarding the consequences of climate and environmental change.

For example, the Semiahmoo First Nation, located right on the border between the United States and Canada, struggled for 25 years to gain access to clean, safe drinking water (Ryan, 2021), while the nearby Tsawwassen First Nation has battled against expansion of the Roberts Bank superport (a major shipping port for Vancouver, BC), which will bring more pollution to its surrounding waters and species that move through the area, such as orca (CBC, 2023; Wood, 2024). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Indigenous communities in the interior of BC grappled with wildfires, which not only affected the air quality in the broader region but led to the destruction of several Indigenous communities, including most notably, those in Lytton, BC.

The waters of the Salish Sea are at particular risk. According to Khangokar et al. (2019), the average temperature of the Salish Sea could rise by a degree and a half Celsius by the year 2095, leading to changes in the oxygenation and acidity in the Sea. Although the authors note in this paper that the overall changes in the Salish Sea might not be as devastating as other coastal waters, this is still a very rapid increase in temperature and could result in shifts to the ecosystem in the Sea, an assessment shared by other scholars (Khangokar, 2019; Wilson, 2020; Government of Canada, 2020; Sobocinski, 2021; Baker 2023; Baloy & Pipp, 2024).

Indigenous academics such as the Citizen Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte (2017) have pointed out that to Indigenous peoples, what is viewed from non-Indigenous perspectives as a

climate apocalypse represents yet another end of the world for Indigenous communities. Whyte argues that Indigenous communities often avoid the fatalism that is tied to climate crisis not because they do not understand the gravity of the situation but rather because they have faced apocalypses themselves through the loss of their lands, the attempted destruction of their cultures, histories, and languages, and how their connections to their broader environment have been eroded via settler legal orders and settler histories. Whyte continues his argument by asserting that if we are to try to find a path forward out of the climate apocalypse that we are creating for ourselves, it may be essential to listen to Indigenous voices and Indigenous worldviews because of their resilience and survivance in the face of colonial apocalypses (Whyte, 2017).

Introduction to the Geographic Indigenous Futures Collaboratory:

To address Whyte's provocation from a geographic perspective, we must approach space and place from an Indigenous perspective. We would like to introduce the research group that hosted the Symposium, which is driven by such principles.

The Geographic Indigenous Futures Collaboratory, or GIF Lab, is a research group based out of the Department of Geography at the University of Victoria. The Collaboratory was founded in 2022 by current lab director Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles as a research space focused on bringing Indigenous geographic praxis and thought into the geography department at the University, into the University as a whole and into the broader community spaces that the Collaboratory works within. As of the writing of this article, the Collaboratory is engaged in research projects and collaborations across North America, ranging from the west coast of Vancouver Island to the Great Lakes, in a variety of different topic areas focusing on various aspects of Indigenous geographies.

The GIF Lab consists of 20 members, including Director Smiles, eight graduate students, one undergraduate student, and ten community members. These community members represent a variety of primary affiliations, including the University of California Davis, Michigan Technological University, and several alumni of the University of Victoria. Historically, collaborators have come from across North America, from Alaska to British Columbia, to Quebec, and even beyond North America, including Aotearoa/New Zealand.

As mentioned, the GIF Lab focuses almost exclusively on community-engaged work with the Indigenous communities it partners with, particularly emphasizing work that furthers Indigenous environmental resurgence from cultural, political, and social perspectives. The communities almost always initiate projects the Collaboratory works with, which ensures that their input and desires for the scope of the work being done are upheld throughout the life of the projects being carried out on their territories. The GIF Lab adheres firmly to Indigenous principles of research ethics and data sovereignty, as defined by leading Indigenous scholars such as Renee Pualani Louis (2007) and Linda Tuhawai Smith (2019), as well as established trainings on the topic, including the First Nation Governance Centre's OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) training.

The GIF Lab was borne out of the desire to further the resurgence of Indigenous relationships to space and place within the discipline of Geography; such relationships are increasingly being centered in Geographic scholarship, but without the input or meaningful participation of Indigenous communities themselves (Louis, 2007; Smiles, 2023). Rather than performing 'top-down' based work or 'parachute research' that objectifies Indigenous nations and their territories, the GIF Lab embraces a model of research that places the community and their needs and wants at the centre of the proposed projects and recognizes that relationships to land, places, and space are indispensable in any Indigenous geographic work (Smiles, 2023). To the members of the Collaboratory, a successful project can be turned over to the community/nation to be managed and continued by them without the need for the GIF Lab to be involved, which is

guided by the Collaboratory's commitment to the self-determination of Indigenous nations in all spheres.

The Symposium:

Keeping in mind the goal of facilitating conversations between all stakeholders in the broader Salish Sea region, Director Smiles and their Geographic Indigenous Futures Collaboratory organized a symposium titled 'Geographic Indigenous Futures of the Salish Sea,' held on July 6th, 2023, in the First Peoples' House at the University of Victoria. The event drew an attendance of nearly 40 people (both in-person and virtually via Zoom) from Vancouver Island, the broader Salish Sea region, and as far away as the Netherlands. Besides facilitating conversations and fellowship over connections to the Salish Sea region, several speakers presented their work, which broadly related to the Salish Sea region and Indigenous geographies. We were fortunate to open the event well with a welcome to the territory and prayer by Songhees Nations member Jessica Joseph.

Highlights from the speakers' presentations are as follows:

Dr. Maya Weeks

The first presentation was from Dr. Maya Weeks, a writer, artist, and geographer on the California coast. Dr. Weeks presented a series of poems that focused on her relationships to water and the ways in which colonialism, pollution, and climate change have impacted water and the broader ocean. While not explicitly focused on the Salish Sea itself, Dr. Weeks' work spoke of how our relationship with the water can transcend boundaries and bring us into various relationships, both good and bad.

Ongoing/Future Work: Dr. Weeks is continuing their work in California, focusing on marine pollution, gender, and feminist political ecology. Dr. Weeks and GIF Lab Director Smiles have had conversations about future collaborations between the two, including art-based and land-based education.

Aidan Gowland

Following Dr. Weeks' presentation, Aidan Gowland, a master's student in the GIF Lab, followed up with a presentation on their ongoing research surrounding the relationships between Parks Canada and local First Nations, particularly around stewarding and protecting Indigenous interests in Parks lands and working with First Nations in governance and oversight. Within the Salish Sea region is one Canadian national park, the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve. Parks Canada has formed relationships with local First Nations in the area, including the WSANEC nations, among others (Parks Canada, 2024). Given stated commitments to reconciliation by the Canadian government, Gowland outlined how Parks Canada has recognized—and in some cases, not recognized historic Indigenous claims and title to the lands and provided recommendations for Parks Canada to follow to live up to its commitment to reconciliation.

Ongoing/Future Work: Gowland is continuing their MA research. As a result of the conference, Aidan and Kusemaat/Shirley Williams entered into conversations about how Gowland's skill with mapping can assist Whiteswan Environmental in their efforts to educate community members in the Salish Sea regarding Lummi relationships to land and water.

Jugal Patel

Jugal Patel, a member of the GIF Lab who most recently was a master's student in the Department of Geography at McGill University, presented his research on participatory research in animal movement analysis. In the talk, Patel argued that community-engaged, participatory work is vital for animal movement analysis, as it can bring critical perspectives on migration,

animal distribution, and how human relationships with animals can impact how animals move through space and place. While Patel's paper was more general in its focus, analysis of animal migration and habitation patterns in the Salish Sea is not new, particularly when it comes to work on critical species such as orca (Osborne, 1999; Olson et al., 2018; Trimbach et al., 2021; Thornton et al., 2022). This, combined with Indigenous community relationships to animal species in the region (Claxton et al., 2018), means that Indigenous communities and their perspectives must be considered in any animal movement analysis research in the Salish Sea.

Ongoing/Future Work: As of the writing of this article, Jugal has taken a job in California with Esri. He and GIF Lab Director Smiles have begun developing a project on animal movement analysis and its connections to Indigenous knowledge systems, with a particular focus on orca movement near Vancouver Island.

Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles

GIF Lab Director Smiles followed up with a presentation about the artificial nature of colonial boundaries across Indigenous lands. They spoke on the ways in which these boundaries could and often do become very rigid, but also could become porous when brought into contact with Indigenous relationships to land. Smiles spoke to how Indigenous ties of kinship and inter-community connections already transcended colonial boundaries in the Salish Sea region. Smiles also outlined the continued and increasing importance of these community ties, considering the risks that the climate crisis would bring to the transboundary Salish Sea region in the future.

Ongoing/Future Work: Smiles continues to collaborate with the participants of the symposium in various ways through the GIF Lab. In particular, Smiles is beginning to develop ideas for field schools and geography camps in the Salish Sea in collaboration with organizations such as Whiteswan Environmental and IMERSS, along with ecocultural mapping. Smiles has also joined the board of Whatcom Intergenerational High School in Bellingham, WA, a school which is focused on the resurgence of Indigenous/Lummi knowledge. Smiles plans to hold another GIF Symposium in 2025 in Anishinaabe lands in Minnesota.

Shirley Williams and Jeannine Georgeson

Following Smiles' presentation, the co-keynote speakers of the Symposium, co-founder of Whiteswan Environmental, Kusemaat/Shirley Williams, and transboundary partner Jeannine Georgeson from the [Institute for Multidisciplinary Ecological Research](#) in the Salish Sea (IMERSS) based on Galiano Island in the southern Gulf Islands of British Columbia, presented on their mission, vision, and collaborative work to support thriving cultures and environments for all in the Salish Sea.

[Whiteswan Environmental \(WE\)](#) is a Indigenous-led nonprofit located in the uppermost corner of the Pacific Northwest in Washington State on the federally reserved lands of the Lummi Nation. According to their website, Whiteswan "[supports] community healing through the natural, cultural and historical restoration to the Salish Sea for 7th generations sustainability as a measure of ecological health protection for all (Whiteswan Environmental, 2024)."

Readers can watch the MIT Indigenous Communities Fellowship Solver/ WE - Digital Ecocultural Mapping Project video [here](#) to learn about why the collaborative efforts of Whiteswan Environmental participants are significant and what people who attend gatherings such as the Geographic Indigenous Futures of the Salish Sea symposium could/can do to join these efforts.

Kusemaat/Shirley Williams added that Whiteswan Environmental, as an Indigenous-led organization, understands that ecocultural stories must be preserved for future generations. WE and IMERSS invite readers, and all interested peoples in the Salish Sea, to contact them to learn more about how to get involved and share their stories.

Ongoing/Future Work: Whiteswan Environmental and IMERSS continue to pursue community-engaged scholarship, research, and collaboration in the trans-boundary Salish Sea region. Whiteswan has hosted two journeys within the San Juan Islands, in Summer 2023, and Spring 2024. They are also engaged with the National Park Service surrounding storytelling of Indigenous presences in NPS sites on San Juan Island. IMERSS is currently developing an ecocultural map of Galiano Island, BC, and is in the process of applying for funds for workshops to bring together stakeholders to conduct further work.

Broader Implications and Conclusions: Towards promoting a geographic Indigenous future of the Salish Sea:

It is clear from the presentations at the Symposium and the conversations that were had during and after the event that the challenges that face the transboundary Salish Sea region are numerous. This is a sentiment shared by scholars who have longstanding research interests in the bioregion (Jones & van der Flier, 2021). These challenges could have severe implications for the environmental health of the waters and lands of the region going forward, to say nothing of the impact to the Indigenous communities and their cultural and political practices by environmental and climate change.

However, the question is raised—what exactly can a symposium held on a university campus do to help solve these issues? We argue that the solution is not just the event itself but rather what it represents, and the connections forged from the event. To the GIF Lab and the participants of the Symposium, our participation was driven by our deep commitment and love for the Salish Sea, a region that many of the participants and attendees in the Symposium call home.

Whether we are originally from these lands or have come to live here from elsewhere, we are obligated to do what we can to ensure that our home remains healthy. This obligation and accountability becomes even more important when the interests of Indigenous communities in the region are considered. Visitors and guests upon these lands must recognize that our connections and relationships with the land must be upheld above all.

To us, a geographic Indigenous future of the Salish Sea lies in amplifying Indigenous voices and relationships to land in ways that center their perspectives while leveraging our institutional privilege to bring these perspectives into spaces that may not historically have been open to them. This potential future focuses on the connections and the generative power of conversation and collaboration to move work forward in a good way—the GIF Lab is pleased to have engaged in ongoing conversations with Whiteswan Environmental and IMERSS with an eye on future collaborations that can further the goals of these organizations and the Indigenous communities they work with and represent.

A geographic Indigenous future centers on our love and connections with the land and waters of the Salish Sea, recognizing that we are intertwined with the land and that we must lean into our relationships with it rather than holding ourselves apart from it.

Ultimately, we hope that this work, even if it is small and ongoing, can help ensure that future generations can enjoy and relate to the Salish Sea and that the Indigenous nations who call the area home can remain resurgent.

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