PRODUCTION OF PLACE: COMMUNITY, CONFLICT AND BELONGING AT WRECK BEACH

by

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B.A., The University of Victoria, 2002

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

In

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Anthropology

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

April 2005

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Abstract: Production of Place: Community, Conflict and Belonging at Wreck Beach

The preservation goals of the Wreck Beach Preservation Society (WBPS) are explored through an analysis of the production of place and nature at Wreck Beach. Present social uses are contextualized, tracing historical uses of the area, including: Musqueam First Nations use, resource extraction, military defense, and finally recreational use and political contest. Information collected from WBPS meetings and conversations with beach regulars is analyzed, presenting social uses of the beach as naturalized, yet often contradictory. Wreck Beach provides an intriguing site of analysis as a place marked by years of defense against urban encroachment, with the beach and the values of the WBPS defined in relation to urbanity—as a proximal site of refuge. Preservation of this place (and thus a particular re-production of place) is inherently tied to the promotion and maintenance of social belonging for the WBPS and supportive beach regulars. For example, as a clothing-optional beach, the perception and preservation of nature at Wreck Beach is bound to understandings of the naked body as natural. Struggles for preservation are struggles to consolidate identities continually carved through the production of place. Responding to marginalization, the WBPS strives to legitimate their role as preservers, and belonging at Wreck Beach.
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Acknowledgements:

The work presented in this thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and support of many people. In first place, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Charles Menzies, for directing my efforts to complete this work. He has been an invaluable source of intellectual support and guidance all through my graduate program.

I would also like to thank Dr. Gaston Gordillo for his timely input, and valued knowledge and advice. The conversations that developed during his graduate seminar on Space and Place inspired me to constantly rethink the nuanced complexity of place.

My thanks also go out to everyone at Wreck Beach for welcoming me to their meetings and sharing their thoughts and opinions during interviews and conversations.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and Tony for their unconditional support and encouragement.

This work was supported by a Canadian Graduate Masters Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
Introduction:

On Sunday May 9th, 2004 the Wreck Beach Preservation Society (WBPS) organized a public protest against the plans of the University of British Columbia (UBC) to construct student residence high-rises near the Point Grey Cliffs—the same cliffs that shield the popular clothing-optional beach from the rest of Vancouver. The development was opposed by beach users for a variety of reasons, including: visual pollution, potential destabilization of the already fragile Point Grey Cliffs, and possible threat to clothing-optional beach use (particularly if students could view naked beach users from the high rises). Although I had attended some of the WBPS’ monthly meetings, this protest would be my first foray into participatory fieldwork, and later that afternoon my first interview. I arrived early at the ‘footprint’ of the construction site and watched as a small group slowly gathered. Nearby, at the head of the trail to the beach a sign was posted asking people to please partake in the protest before enjoying the beach; a couple of beachers made their way down the 350 steps to collect people that were already basking in the warm morning sun.

The bulk of the protestors that gathered knew each other intimately through many years of meeting both on the sand and in monthly meetings of the WBPS—a non-profit group devoted to maintaining Wreck Beach in “as nearly a natural state as possible.” Judy Williams, devoted

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I conducted my fieldwork over approximately 5 months, including: formal and informal interviews, attending Wreck Beach Preservation Society (WBPS) meetings, Campus and Community Planning meetings, and several organized protests. In total, I met with 22 individuals, some partaking in multiple follow-up interviews. Core participants were active members of the WBPS and regular beach users. By regular beach users, I mean individuals who have been frequenting the beach for more than two decades (everyone I spoke with has been coming at least since the early 1980s, and many since the 1960s), and spending the majority of their summers at the beach. This core group consisted of 9 men and 4 women, reflecting the consistent male bias (roughly 2:1) visible at the beach. Additional participants include: former residents of the area (Booming Ground Village), members of UBC administration, participants in the Campus planning groups, an RCMP official, GVRD representative, and a military historian. As well, numerous conversations and observations on and off the beach supplement formal interviews, enhancing my understanding of the beach’s many layers. I am also grateful to the members of the WBPS for welcoming me to their monthly meetings for 9 months, where various interests and concerns were always democratically and often passionately articulated.

Beach users disagree over the exact number of steps; some count as many as 400 (depending on how sloped areas are measured).
defender of the beach and head of the society called greetings and exchanged hugs with people as they arrived. The protest was relatively small compared to the number of visitors who might be at the beach on a hot summer day; Wreck Beach is immensely popular in Vancouver, attracting around 300,000 visitors a summer and up to 10,000 on a single day. But it was early spring (Mother’s Day in fact), and the protest had been organized quickly, prompted by the speedy construction plans of UBC, who had already issued a Development Permit for the first high rise and were beginning to break ground. The protest was informal—people filtered through, some spread across the lawn on blankets and munching on picnic lunches while beach musicians sang. Others marched with placards while Judy delivered a speech and responded to media questions. Visitors were invited to sign the petition and write letters to UBC to protest the construction, and encourage officials to relocate the high-rise buildings. In what appeared to be a mark of good fortune, an eagle—the beach’s self-described ‘totem animal’—was spotted perching in a nearby tree; as a finale, the entire group huddled for a photo opportunity. Culminating in a final burst of applause, protestors formed a procession to the beach, anxious to greet the sun, sand and sea they were once again striving to protect. Regulars were anxious to get back to their second ‘home.’

That afternoon at the beach, there was a sense of jubilance. The protest had finished without a hitch, uniting old and new friends to save the integrity of Wreck Beach—a place marked by nature, acceptance and community. Beach regulars laid out sarongs and umbrellas in their usual spots. Generally, the 7.8 kilometer long beach can be divided spatially into trail sections (see Fig 1.1, page v.), each section characterized by certain user groups. The southern-most boundary of Wreck Beach—Trail 7 (or Old Wreck Beach Trail), is used predominantly by gay males. Acadia Beach comprises the most Northern boundary of Wreck Beach, attracting regulars who have shifted away from the Main Beach (including people who have developed
mobility problems and therefore can't access the steeper trails), as well as drifters from nearby Spanish Banks Beach East; Acadia Beach was the popular area of beach use in the 1960s-1970s. Acadia Beach, and Trails 3 and 4 attract significantly less visitors than the other sandier areas of Wreck Beach. Trail 6 or Main Beach is currently the most popular and festive area of the beach—drawing musicians and vendors. The area directly below the stairs usually attracts a younger crowd, many clothed. The area closest to the North Arm breakwater (separating Trails 6 and 7) is used by people wanting a quieter atmosphere and on windy days by people seeking shelter. Adjacent to this area is an area marked with tended flower-beds referred to as ‘The Casino’ (this area often holds small-bet gambles) which is used traditionally by regulars, and attracts more naturist or nude use than other areas of the beach. Naturism, as I will describe in more detail later, is a philosophy and practice that associates nakedness with enhanced individual and social health, and a closer relationship with nature. Many of the regulars who sit in ‘The Casino,’ including many of the beachers I met with throughout my research, have been coming to the beach since the 1960s or 1970s.

‘Regulars’ is a relative designation based on degree of involvement with the beach—and for analytic purposes I have made a designation (though not an entirely exclusive one) between ‘regulars’ or ‘beachers’ and ‘visitors.’ This transient group of ‘visitors,’ includes: University students and staff, international tourists, skim-boarders, ‘textiles,’ partiers, ‘gawkers,’ and vendors. The term ‘textiles’ describes beach users who wear clothes, while ‘gawkers’ is a term commonly used to refer to individuals who visit Wreck Beach as voyeurs. The group of ‘regulars’ or ‘beachers’ includes: individuals, couples, and families who visit the beach every summer, most use the beach naked, and are generally members or supportive of the WBPS. For this group, the beach truly is a second home.
In the following pages, I will explore Wreck Beach as a site of contest, and how the beach becomes a ‘home’ or a place of belonging for some people—a place worthy of preserving. My argument is that this happens through the ongoing production of place and nature. Preservation of place is tied to maintaining community and validating belonging with preservation being intrinsic to production, and belonging intrinsic to community. ‘Preservation’ is inherently a struggle to re-produce a place, physically and socially, in a particular image. Further, in the case of Wreck Beach, the people working to preserve understand themselves as comprising a community, sharing a common goal of retaining a site they continue to shape; a place embedded with relationships and ideals—a place where they experience belonging. For the dedicated, preservation is a true test of endurance, a never-ending battle against shifting and growing webs of relations. I will demonstrate how Wreck Beach has been and continues to be given meaning through the social, historical, and political relations entangled in the production of place and nature, revealing that places are not static or bound, but vibrant processes teeming with complexities and contradictions. Further, Wreck Beach has been marked by a recurring struggle between the Wreck Beach Preservation Society (WBPS) and UBC campus planning and development initiatives. How do social, historical and political processes continue to inform these struggles? In sum, my research explores: how Wreck Beach is given meaning and contested, the social production of nature in both a conceptual and physical sense, the contradictory constitution of Wreck Beach, and conflicts over urban encroachment. Before delving into further discussion, I will provide some background on the concepts informing and framing my analysis.

**Place, Nature and Identity:**

Social production of place signifies the way space is continually shaped and made meaningful through the motivations of different social actors. A range of authors have addressed
place production and the importance of place in a variety of contexts. In general, multiple writers have promoted the study of place—replacing static, objectified values of place for insightful considerations of the dynamic social processes involved (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992; Rodman, 1992; Gill and O Riain, 2002; Berdoulay, 1989). As Rodman asserts, “places are not inert containers. They are politicized, culturally specific, local and multiple constructions” (Rodman, 1992:11). Through my work, I aim to show that Wreck Beach is a nuanced and often contradictory place.

I am also interested in how Wreck Beach is experienced, particularly by regular beach users. In *Place and Placelessness*, phenomenologist Edward Relph affirms connections between place and collective identity, describing “landscape as expression of communal beliefs” (Relph, 1976, 34). This is similar to Keith Basso’s discussion of the Apache experiences of place, where a “sense of place” evokes the identities and ideals of Apache peoples (Basso, 1996). At Wreck Beach, I believe that the preservation goals of the WBPS are securely tied to maintaining social identity and a sense of belonging. My understanding of belonging for beach regulars partially relates to what Relph calls the experience of “existential insideness” (Relph, 1976: 55). He describes this as “the insideness that most people experience when they are at home and in their own town or region, when they know the place and its people and are known and accepted there...Existential insideness is part of knowing implicitly that this place is where you belong” (ibid). While I agree that regulars experience and attempt to preserve a sense of belonging at Wreck Beach, I disagree with Relph’s insinuation that this feeling is inherent to place, as well as the tendency in phenomenology to describe an essential, unchanging character of place. In privileging descriptions and experiences of place, phenomenologists have often fixed identities within a given space and brushed over political and historical processes (Demerritt, 2002: 771).
Rather, I see the experience of belonging at Wreck Beach as stemming from the production of place. My research demonstrates that Wreck Beach is constantly produced: made and re-made by social actors, and linked to particular social, historical and political moments. While this site may have always had the physical ingredients for a beach (ie. sea, shoreline, protection of cliffs), social efforts were imperative in producing this place as a clothing-optional beach. Beach use is not intrinsic, and as I will show grew out of social and political tug of wars, transfiguring previous uses of the area. Similarly, Urbain in *At the Beach* provides a particularly evocative look at the development of the beach as a site of leisure, examining how the dislocation of work and Native Peoples from coastal areas assisted the “production of the natural” (2003: 45).

In order to understand how places are constituted, I turn to the work of Lefebvre, who in *The Production of Space*, theorized that space is both product and producer (Lefebvre, 1991: 142). In other words, spaces (or for my discussion, places) emerge from and constitute social action. Applying Lefebvre’s ideas on production, Don Mitchell (1996) has integrated a historical and political approach to place in *The Lie of the Land*, where he reveals ties between migrant labour and the production of landscape in California. Also of relevance is Kahn’s work on place production in Tahiti, describing the roles of marketing, Hollywood, art, and “imaginaries” in the production of Tahiti as a tourist destination (Kahn, 2003). These works draw on Lefebvre’s unified theory of space, examining the entwinement of physical, social and mental space rather than analyzing “things in space” (Lefebvre, 1991: 36). I also endeavour to describe the complexity of social relations implicated in and constituting Wreck Beach. In sum, experiences of belonging at Wreck Beach are not implicit or ‘natural,’ but emerge from the creation and recreation of this place by social actors. Further, these experiences of belonging do not go
unchallenged, and threats take on multiple guises. I will show, as does Lefebvre, that place is inherently contradictory—arising from conflicts and struggles over space.

Most influential and formative to my analysis is the work of Bruce Braun and Hugh Raffles. Both authors consider the production of nature in contested areas. Since at Wreck Beach, the production of place and nature interpenetrate, a consideration of nature-making is instrumental to my own analysis. Both Braun and Raffles skillfully draw out the intricate relationship between culture, nature and power in different rainforests, refuting the externality of nature vis-à-vis social practice. In The Intemperate Rainforest, Braun frames his analysis with the Clayoquot Sound protest movement of 1994. He examines the ‘social natures’ of the rainforest, challenging the fundamental divide between nature and culture, and critiquing activist movements founded on this division. Exposing the fallacy of ‘pristine’ rainforest, he shows how this emerges from a variety of social interactions, including: severance of First Nations’ land, and representations of: explorers, foresters, environmentalists, artists, scientists, and adventure travelers. Hugh Raffles takes a similar approach in a different location in his book In Amazonia: A Natural History. The Amazon is typically envisioned as a place characterized by passive peoples and active nature, yet proves to be much more complex. Drawing on narratives, he reveals the shaping of place by various groups of people over time—resulting in a physically and conceptually produced Amazon. The refurbished image is a managed landscape, a river carved by indentured labourers to reach the riches of the forest. Wreck Beach also emerges from the collision of social and physical productions of a particular nature.

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As Neil Smith remarks, speaking of the ‘construction of nature’ is problematic, implying a pre-existing divide of nature-culture (1996: 273). Following this, I choose to speak of the process as one of production rather than construction. This is similar to Soper’s claim that nature is “culturally processed” rather than constructed (1995: 142). Braun also uses “production metaphors”...to signal the “always becoming of nature” (2002: 265).
I agree with authors like Braun and Raffles whose works shed light on the fallacy of the nature-culture dichotomy (Soper, 1995; Cronon, 1995; Braun, 2002; Raffles, 2003; Demeritt, 2002; Castree and Braun, 1998). Part of my analysis is centered on nature-making at Wreck Beach, based on the idea that nature does not exist in stasis outside of culture, but is lived and made by social actors. At Wreck Beach, understandings of ‘nature’ are integral to the social and physical constitution of the beach, and beachers simultaneously absorb and transcend the nature-culture dichotomy. For instance, I will explain how the beach is preserved in order to match particular ideas about nature, and describe how nature is embodied—rendering the naked body ‘natural.’ In sum, nature is an important means of identifying the beach and the Wreck Beach community.

Further, I agree with Braun in his critique of Cronon—simply purporting the ideological cannot reveal the ‘truth’ of nature (Braun, 2002:258). Cronon’s primary concern in *Uncommon Ground* is the substitution of singular ‘nature’ with culturally valued ‘natures’ (1996: 55). Unlike the work of Braun and Raffles, he does not propose new ways for understanding how natures are produced and lived, implying that it is only ideas that are flawed. In his essay, Cronon argues that wilderness is a fabricated concept, born out of the divide between nature and culture (Cronon, 1996: 69-90). Further, he argues that this divide denies the human management of wilderness, while propagating the destruction of non-natures. Cronon insists that we need to rethink wilderness as an ideological construct rather than an objective material reality. But as Braun states, the pursuit is “not about unveiling the ideological, it is about attending to how statements get made up, taken up, and turned into facts” (2002: 259). This goal, as Braun explicates, allows for a better understanding of power relations and peoples’ roles in making and re-making natures (ibid: 14). Therefore, the concern is not (as for Cronon) how conceptual constructs (such as nature or wilderness) inform human intervention, but how and for whom
nature is produced (Smith, 1990: 63). Accordingly, I do not intend to downplay the efforts of the WBPS, or suggest that there is never a reason to preserve Wreck Beach. Rather, I wish to discuss the work of place/nature-making and consider motives obscured in this preservation debate, and the social and material consequences of production. Combining an understanding of the role of nature-making within the production of place, I will trace the emergence of the beach, as a framework for understanding the domesticity of this place and provide a context for understanding how Wreck Beach is defined, contested and preserved.

**History of Wreck Beach**

A) Ulksen, Resources and Defense

Prior to the era of Wreck Beach, Musqueam First Nations depended on this shoreline for their livelihood (Musqueam Band Information Package, 1996). The beach area was used for crabbing, and the sea and Fraser River provided opportunities for fishing salmon, hunting marine mammals and collecting shellfish (ibid). As one source explains, the land and sea were also invaluable sources of knowledge: “the Musqueam people used the peninsula as a training site for their youth... The land itself was, and is, a place for education, for growth” (Norman: 2004, “Point Grey Pre-University”). Prior to European arrival in the 18th century, this area was known as Ulksen or “the nose” (describing the shape of the extending portion of the peninsula), but was dissolved by the English designation “Point Grey”—bestowed by Captain George Vancouver in reverence to his good friend Captain Grey. Since then, the experiences of Musqueam Peoples have been marked by appropriation of land and disenfranchisement, manifested in the declaration of portions of this land as University Endowment Lands (UEL) in 1912, unsettled land claims, and the granting of this area (including Wreck Beach) as parkland in 1989—placing
it under the jurisdiction of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD). As cited in the Musqueam Band Information package, "because our villages were in the way of a greedy and growing city, our people were treated very shabbily and shoved off into a corner. Our reserve was one of the smallest allotted." This reserve is presently located near the southern-most boundary of what is now known as Wreck Beach. Recently, in the protest against the Marine Residences, Musqueam have secured legal counsel to oppose the paucity of consultation sought (by UBC and GVRD) with Musqueam in regards to proceeding Campus developments. The lawyer pursued that 'the land is not just GVRD land,' since Musqueam rights were never extinguished (GVRD-UBC Joint Committee Meeting, October 29th, 2004). Although the WBPS is respectful of original Musqueam title, the maintenance of this area as a clothing-optional beach does unintentionally serve to further marginalize Musqueam rights and claims. In The Intemperate Rainforest, Braun contends that the erasure of First Nations from the land permitted the objectification of wilderness (or 'nature') (1998: 63). In brief, the continuance of this space as a recreational clothing-optional beach requires the invisibility of First Nations title. Despite this, the University's present development initiatives have encouraged these incommensurable paths to converge, as both WBPS and Musqueam are actively opposing the development of UBC's Marine Residences.

European arrival propelled a period of intensive resource extraction in the region. Much of the present Point Grey area was logged midway into the 20th century (primarily as financial support for campus developments), with log chutes constructed to distribute logs to the beach and onto Burrard inlet, disrupting the precarious cliffs. In 1928, labourers brought large stones

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4 Preceding decisions of the provincial government to pass provincial crown land to the GVRD as parkland, Musqueam Nation had submitted a comprehensive land claim to the federal government. The decision to designate the area regional parkland was initially interpreted by Musqueam as an attempt to ignore and diffuse negotiations. When the area was established as a park, the GVRD signed a sworn affidavit to ensure that Musqueam would not be prejudiced by the transfer of land. (Musqueam Comprehensive Land Claim: Preliminary Report on Musqueam Land Use and Occupancy, June 1984).
(that had been transported to the foreshore from Gulf Island quarries) from the beach up the Point Grey Cliffs to facilitate the construction of the University of British Columbia. In the same year, ships were sunk at the beach to create a breakwater, inspiring the popular name—Wreck Beach. In 1935, clear-cutting for campus development removed absorptive vegetation; with heavy rains and insufficient drainage, the extra pressure on the Point Grey Cliffs provoked a cliff-slide, creating Graham’s Gully. One of the most obvious effects on Wreck Beach today comes from the construction of the North Arm breakwater in 1950-51 by the North Fraser Harbour Commission, meant to protect logs from wood borers called toredos (Vancouver City Archives, City Clerk’s Records, series 93, 52-F-6, file 1, 1977-1978, p. 2). This would have a lasting impact on sand deposition, accumulating around the breakwater. With sands now ‘feeding’ the shoreline, this construction unintentionally enabled the development of the present beach area. Logging activities not only left lasting impacts on the succeeding beach profile, but also the nature of the fishing industry. Terry Slack, a former resident of the Canadian Mixed Export Booming Grounds, near present-day Wreck Beach (south-east of Trail 7), has observed and reported on the disappearing eulachon migration through the Fraser River (Slack: 2002). The run, once abundant in this area and bringing in hungry followers such as: dogfish, seals, sea lions, bald eagles, and great blue heron are now defunct. In At the Beach, Urbain contends that the emergence of the beach as a leisure zone required the erasure of Natives and of work, until it was “ready to be consumed as a world dissociated from the natural and social realities of production” (2003: 46). It is interesting to note that an area in which colonialism and labour initiatives had disenfranchised First Nations belonging, would later become a retreat for people discontent with dominant society.

5 Information comes from fisherman Terry Slack who had lived near Wreck Beach in the Canadian Mixed Export Booming Grounds Village. Slack described the impact of the breakwater, jetty-building and dredging on: destroying fish habitats, closing spawning routes in this area, the end of smelt fisheries, and the disappearance of eulachon.
Another intriguing contrast to the present use of this place as a clothing-optional beach is the historical importance of this area as a site of defense. Prior to European arrival, this area was an important point of protection for Musqueam Peoples:

The Musqueam band used this site as a lookout for approaching northern tribes— in particular the Squamish and the Haida of Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Islands. If approaching war canoes were spotted, runners were sent up the coast through wooded trails to alert tribal members. The Musqueam defense would then counter the aggressor by embarking war canoes and warding off invasion (Sparrow, 1976 cited in Norman: 2004, “Point Grey Pre-University”).

During World War II, military defenses were situated on these same grounds. Although little recourse was ever necessary, two searchlights were supervised, in order to illuminate the waters and support the gun emplacements situated above the cliffs.⁶ Closed in 1949, these searchlights now provide a visual reminder of past use, as well as the impending erosion of the area. The searchlight towers lie between Trails 3 and 4, and though initially built close to the cliff face, now stand meters away. It is fascinating that a site once utilized for potential defense is now preferred as a place for what could be interpreted as the ultimate defenselessness—nudity. Now the only defense afforded from the beach is directed above the cliffs.

B) Recreational Use to Political Arena

Motivated by seclusion from the Point Grey Cliffs, the use of the beach for nude recreation reportedly dates back to as early as the 1920s. The heightened popularity of Wreck Beach as a nude or ‘free beach,’ as they were initially coined, coincided with anti-war movements triggered by resentment to the Vietnam War and coupled with desires for a break from conservative values (Lencek and Bosker, 1998: 263). Nudity at Wreck Beach began slowly and was concentrated in the area now referred to as Acadia Beach. In 1970 this relative solitude

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⁶ Although there was one false alarm, resulting in the accidental firing on a fishing boat in 1942 that crossed suspect lines (Moogk, 1978: 98)
changed with the concerted efforts of Korky Day, a draft dodger from San Francisco who organized a ‘nude-in’ to secure nude use, gathering an estimated 300 people.

The beach also made a public appearance during the Parks Board initiatives in 1969 to construct a 5 million dollar development including promenades, roads, and a rowing course (Vancouver Sun, March 28, 1969: 33; UBC Reports, February 27, 1969). During this time, the Vancouver Parks Board held jurisdiction of the shorefront area, but their authority was challenged when the dumping of dredged fill spurred a student led group called “Public Concerns” to build a human chain, preventing further construction (Ubyssy, Friday October 24, 1969: 6). They succeeded in prompting further review of this ambitious plan, and the dredged fill (apparently intended to stall cliff erosion and lay the groundwork for future development) proved useless—winds and sea carried it away. Despite this victory, beach users experienced déjà vu when in 1973 gravel dumping was orchestrated by the Parks Board and Swan Wooster Engineering Company to prevent erosion, this time, provoked by plans of the University of British Columbia to build the Museum of Man, now the Museum of Anthropology (Vancouver Sun, January 6, 1973: 5; Vancouver Sun, February 8, 1973: 6). Outraged by the lack of public input, another protest evolved and the “Committee to Save Wreck Beach” – a precursor to what is now the Wreck Beach Preservation Society (WBPS) developed (Ubyssy, Thursday September 13, 1973: 4).

Since this time, many more projects have been challenged by the WBPS\(^7\). Some completed endeavors have radically changed the beach and its social uses, such as the dumping of dredged gate at the base of Trail 6 (extending from the breakwater to Point Grey) in 1977 (Bauer, 13

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\(^7\) WBPS has actively resisted many projects—perceived to impinge on the beach. Examples include: Jet fuel crossings, service road constructions, restaurants, and condominiums built into the cliff face.
During interviews, Judy Williams—tenacious defender of Wreck Beach—described her reaction to this:

I came out swinging that January—actually I showed up on the beach with a carpenter’s apron on and all these tools to dismantle bulldozers. I figured I would do that before I went off to teach school. Who would have thought that they would be there at 6:30 in the morning but they were there working. So I never had a chance... By the time I got to the bottom...they had already started with bulldozers and had huge mountains of logs crushed. It was just horrible. I was shrieking and crazed. I just flew at them and I wanted to know who was behind it... I was muddy and disheveled and full of tears and pissed off at the whole world because our precious beach was being raped like that. I caused a three car pile up sneaking out of school [later] that day. I sneaked away five minutes early to try and go to get an injunction. Needless to say I didn’t get the injunction...But then we signed press releases and got the word out and everyone—the Sierra Club and everyone was like ‘what are you doing? Where is the public input?’ Well there wasn’t any public input because it was just a good old boys decision. Absolutely horrendous...piling all that contaminated dredgate up there and they had no environmental monitoring whatsoever. The pipes that were spewing this stuff onto the beach were over 5 feet in diameter and there were no environmental controls. That dredgate shelf that they created was 200 feet wide and 20 feet high and it destroyed eel grass beds and the fresh water sources along the edge of the beach.

In addition to eliciting widespread public reaction, this also spurred the formation of the Marine Drive Foreshore Park Erosion Control Advisory Committee (later renamed the Wreck Beach Area Advisory Committee) which evolved into the Wreck Beach Preservation Committee—what is now the WBPS. Coupled with berm building activities (between Trail 3 and Trail 4) in the 1980s meant to halt cliff erosion, the dumping of this contaminated fill shifted beach use from the Acadia Beach to the contemporary Main Beach area. The decreasing availability of sand around the Acadia Beach area had prompted beachers to find other spots to lay their blankets. Although, the dredgate dumped at Trail 6 (Main Beach) was less than desirable and was filled with rubble and concretions, it gradually became a more popular social space than the rockier Trail 4 and Acadia Beach areas. These developments have had lasting impacts on the physical and social constitution of the beach, as Trail 6/Main Beach remains the most heavily used area of Wreck Beach.
The University’s proximity and penchant for expansion has been an impetus for ongoing struggles with the beach. Recently, the battle over construction of Marine Student Residences, a proposed four-building high rise complex, has been protested as a visual impairment, obstruction of migratory bird fly-ways, and potential disablement of the fragile cliff face (citing evidence of recent slides in June, November and December of 2004). As well, the cumulative University developments would have tremendous effects on beach use, with an estimated rise in campus population from a present 10,400 to 20,900 in 2021 (University-town, February 2004: 2). This has provoked numerous protests and legal representation by the WBPS, (and more recently the Musqueam and Pacific Spirit Regional Park Society) and an extensive petition campaign.

I have indicated so far how this beach has been changed based on past and present desires and is in fact a very domesticated site of contestation. I have provided this background to contextualize forthcoming discussion of the way Wreck Beach is defined by social uses, including naturalness at Wreck Beach. I will now analyze how place is continually constituted through the actions of participants, rendering certain uses more compelling—establishing what should be preserved.

**Social Use of Wreck Beach**

Wilderness is the natural, un Fallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to corrupting influences of our artificial lives (Cronon, 1996: 80).

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8 On April 10th, 2004 blimps were raised in two ‘tower footprints’ by the WBPS to assess visibility of the cliffs. The resultant argument included whether beach area encompasses high water vs. low water mark. As well, this was presented by the media as concern over privacy for nudists, with public retorts marking these claims as “unnatural” for nudists (“The Province,” April 13, 2004).
The Wreck Beach Preservation Society (WBPS) remains an active force, and for this reason the following discussion is based on information from this group and supportive ‘regulars’ or ‘beachers.’ In practice, this comprises the Wreck Beach community, though in theory this would likely include all beach users. Although the WBPS is not solely responsible for the physical and conceptual fashioning of Wreck Beach, as advocates for preservation they announce and situate certain assumptions. Through public protest and resistance movements, as well as social events, meetings and summer newsletters, the WBPS aims to educate and mobilize users in accordance with naturist etiquette and WBPS principles. The material effect of preserving in ‘as nearly a natural state as possible’ is a beach free of roads, concession stands, and marinas. But preservation debates are simultaneously immersed in desires to maintain group legitimacy and authenticate belonging. Resulting is a beach inscribed with distinct social uses that reflect and confirm an underlying ideology whilst blurring signs of intentionality. I will uncover the desires, relationships, and ideals embedded in the naturalization of social uses of the beach, as well as how uses are challenged both on and off the beach. Further, I will demonstrate that the values the beach is built from are often problematic and contradictory. The discussion of social uses will provide a frame for understanding what the WBPS is struggling to preserve.

A) Wreck Beach: Celebrating Sanctity

Rooting commentary in the consideration of this beach as a “sacred place” is connected to my fieldwork experiences. The envisioned sanctity of Wreck Beach forms the backbone of preservation debates and during research, when conversations with beachers became too

9 By reference to supportive regulars/beachers, I mean the group of individuals who, though not necessarily active in the WBPS, tend to agree with the general principles and social uses of the beach and interests of the WBPS (eg. nude use, opposition to Marine Residences).

10 I must caution that my separate treatment of ideals and social uses should not imply their insularity. For analytic purposes, I have made divisions that in practice intermingle to produce Wreck Beach.
analytic, I was often steered to the visceral and intangible qualities of the beach. An edited excerpt from my field notes will illustrate this concern.

In closing an interview that had consisted largely of factual questions on the history of the beach and physical changes, I provided the final customary chance for Judy to sum up her thoughts and add anything she felt I may have missed. Exposing my own lack of inquiry on the unique and sacred nature of this place, I was left with these parting words: “[Wreck Beach] is an energy center. It is a spiritual center...It’s a myriad, a plethora of beautiful strands that are all woven into one rope. It is the most precious place on earth and I will die to fight for it and I can’t tell you why. Here is where my heart is.

Sentiments of adoration and loyalty surfaced in nearly every conversation with beachers. Repeatedly, participants found it difficult to articulate their meanings of the beach, describing this place as inseparable from realms of sensation and experience. As James Loewen explained:

I think that one of the things that one experiences in coming to such a place regularly over a great period of time is the ebb and flow of the seasons in nature that just goes into your being and in a way that is not possible to describe—perhaps if you are a poet or a painter you can describe some of that.

These narratives mesh with Relph’s idea of existential insideness, an experience he describes in which “place is experienced without deliberate and self-conscious reflection and yet is full of significance” (1976: 55). The irreducible value of Wreck Beach is closely tied to a sense of belonging.

For many, this place is embodied—incorporated through seasons of loyal pilgrimage. To meet the arduous staircase, and celebrate exposure to the elements—earth, air, water, and fire—is key to the experience. Robert Plowman described the use of this place as “quasi-religious,” worshipped in the reverence for nature’s cyclical rhythms. Every evening, exuberant applause marks the setting of the sun, a thank-you for the day that has passed. If Wreck Beach is the temple, then naturists are the most devout of worshipers. Similarly, Judy Williams, the relentless defender of the beach and spearhead of the WBPS, has been referred to as the “Priestess of Wreck Beach” (Chan, 1999: x). Naturist beliefs range in degree, but integral is the enhancement
of one’s relationship with nature through being naked. Recognition of Wreck Beach as sacred intensifies attachments to place. The beach is chosen as a site for momentous events such as wedding ceremonies, vigils for ill beachers, and the spreading of ashes. Although the sanctity of place is understood by beachers as inherent to it, celebrating place as sacred does serve to cultivate identities and relationships, strengthening attachments to the beach.

Reference to the sanctity of place often implicates prior First Nations use. Describing Wreck Beach as a sacred place may also be interpreted as an extension of and desired alignment with First Nations use. For example, visual descriptions of the beach often draw similarities with periods of First Nations land use. In an email to the GVRD-UBC joint committee, one beacher remarks:

In the last several years the beach users have started placing some logs vertically in the sand to hang hammocks and to plant gardens beside. None of them are straight, and from the low tide line, it is reminiscent of the historical photographs of the villages on the Queen Charlotte Islands (GVRD/UBC Joint Committee Agenda, correspondence: September 28, 2004).

First Nations land use, symbols and histories are occasionally adopted by beachers. For instance, the eagle is referred to as the Wreck Beach ‘totem,’ and recent protests have discouraged construction because of the sacred quality of this place for Musqueam peoples. Although this promotes a continuity of place worthy of preservation, it also indicates a previous use that has been subsumed partly by beach use. First Nations presence is firmly secured in the past, over which beach use is imposed and naturalized. Yet, beach use and preservation (as I will discuss later) are legitimated by idioms of timelessness that often draw on First Nations’ histories.

B) Community: Negotiating Acceptance

Wreck Beach is built on webs of relationships, and the beach is often described as a community. The production and reproduction of Wreck Beach emerges from a community
promoting tenets of tolerance, acceptance, a preference for living naturally, and moving against the grain. In discussing the relationship between the social and political time, and its impact on the beach, Marilyn provided the following response:

I think in the 60s there was a lot of emphasis on kind of doing your own thing. That was actually a phrase ‘do your own thing’ so there was a feeling that if you wanted to do something different from the mainstream, people would try to accept that...I'm not trying to say that everything from the 60s and 70s was all that progressive but there was some consciousness raising and I do really think that did happen...there was a lot more encouragement to challenge the status quo and I think that nudists continue to espouse those ideals.

Although nowadays the beach as a whole does not encompass a single social or political group, there is a remaining community at the beach, composed of original beachers as well as continually attracting and adopting newcomers that express similar ideals.

I was told that the community at Wreck Beach was strongest in the early years (1960s/1970s), when the management of the beach was primarily the work of beachers. James Loewen describes, for instance the feats of trail builder Gerrard:

I actually saw him in action and saw some of the engineering feats that he did. His efforts are still in use today. Amazing long logs that had been placed in positions to make a bridge and then dirt piled over to really stabilize. So he was a master builder and part of the history of the physical aspects of the beach.

Beachers were physically fashioning Wreck Beach, based on conceptions of an ideal beach. Because the beach community was relatively small during this era, there was also more social contact. Parch describes the takeover of the beach by GVRD as a “BC/AD period”—when compromises had to be made between the visions of the Wreck Beach community and the park management plans of the GVRD. Though privy to social changes over the years, the beach also has a relatively closer community than other beaches in Vancouver, attracting more regulars, and hosting annual events such as the Bare Buns Run and Wreck Beach Day, a photo shoot, as well as regular beach clean ups. Also, the beach has a strong element of self-policing, particularly
against hard drugs and sexual offenders. These community-based initiatives help strengthen the community at the beach, further grounding experiences and relationships in place.

Many regulars describe beach relationships as both friendship and family. Naturism is principally based on acceptance, and intimate friendships have formed over the years at Wreck Beach. Although there is disagreement over whether or not the beach has changed socially, most insist that there is still a sense of the original unity. Consider Judy’s comments on the ‘family’ of Wreck Beach:

We are definitely a family. And like all families you have disagreements but you still love each other. And I think Wreck Beach provides one critical factor that most other beaches don’t or other areas don’t and that is the fact that at a time when families are increasingly breaking down and youth are alienated from those families and they are alienated from one another that Wreck Beach provides the family structure that is missing.

Everyone I spoke with mentioned the friendships they had at the beach, and the experience of a more genuine sociability. Many had been raised at the beach, and some had proceeded to raise their own families there. Others had met spouses and best friends, or through the acceptance they experienced at the beach—used this place as a lever for understanding their own sexuality. Although many friendships extend beyond the beach, they are rooted there. This is alluded to in the next selection:

Discussing the importance of Wreck Beach, Judy Williams referenced one of her favorite quotes by Albert Camus: “In the midst of winter I finally learned that there was within me an invincible summer.” She explained: “Summer is when the beach is flourishing and everyone is here and summer is when I can be myself completely because here I have friends.”

For regulars, personal and social reconnection has become grounded in Wreck Beach, particularly in the months of summer. In sum, the place and people—embracing values and friendships—are inseparable; place “resides in people as fully as people reside in place” (Raffles, 2003: 8).
Although beachers pride themselves on a welcoming and accepting attitude, not everyone who visits the beach cooperates with the ideals projected by the WBPS. As Urry suggests in his discussion of the romantic gaze, “by evangelizing, [the romantic gaze] is digging its own grave” (1990: 46). Over the thirty plus years of public protest, the WBPS has elicited support for their struggles, but also piqued widespread interest in Wreck Beach—attracting a variety of local and international visitors. The surmounting popularity of Wreck Beach has incited visible tensions—culminating in an “us” vs “them” struggle between ‘regulars’ and ‘visitors,’ leading to acknowledgements by many regulars that problems emanate from outside the “Wreck Beach community.” As Ron Farrington remarked “you know they don’t have a vested interest in preserving the beach in its original form.” The shifting ‘out-group’ includes: textiles, drug-dealers, sexual offenders, gawking tourists, vendors, partiers, and occasionally fishermen. Furthermore, divisions attributed to popularization can only be expected to increase—with the projected doubling of campus residents and decreasing green spaces, more people will likely seek out Wreck Beach. Some regulars like Ron have responded to changes by migrating to other areas of the beach, claiming Trail 6 to be a “zoo.” As he explained:

[There are] days down there when it is not that different from being on Second Beach. I mean there are some days when you can close your eyes and you can be anywhere but just not on Wreck Beach.

The popularity of the beach, though helpful in preservation campaigns, is also perceived by some beachers as threatening the ‘character’ or integrity of Wreck Beach.

Specifically, not everyone who visits the beach chooses to get nude. Consider the following vignette:

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11 Second Beach is a popular family beach located at Stanley Park in Vancouver, B.C
During fieldwork at the beach on a hot, sunny day in July, I observed a scene that staged the divisions at the beach over use. Although one section is often marked off with small signs reading "nude only" use, this day I watched a man carve "NUDE ONLY ZONE" in the sand, spanning the entire length of accessible shoreline.

I found this scene pertinent because it reveals the most obvious divide at the beach—those who undress versus those who do not. Further, this social ideal is being constituted in a spatial barrier, in an attempt to direct the socio-spatial organization of the beach. This supports Lefebvre's point that social and spatial relations are inseparable; desires for social changes are being enacted spatially (Lefebvre, 1991: 36). At Wreck Beach, unwillingness to disrobe is often a point of contention, since the beach is clothing optional and not subject to enforcement other than mild social encouragement. Although perceptions of textiles vary between beachers, from welcoming to ambivalent to hostile, textiles are often perceived as a threat to the community and original spirit of the beach. Craig Heale explained his reservations towards textiles:

The night-time crowd is a different crowd—nobody comes down here naked at night time and they are drunk and they burn all the logs...The people that cause the most trouble are the textiles. The drug dealers that come down here to sell drugs to young kids. They don't take their clothes off. They got their drugs in their clothes.

While most beachers are accepting (I never witnessed any direct aggression towards textiles), the textile population at the beach is often treated with greater suspicion and sometimes pegged as negatively affecting the beach in a variety of ways. As one regular vendor described in a Vancouver Sun article: “There’s a lot of people too shy to get naked. I call them perverts. They see us like actors on a stage—and they’re the audience.”(‘Vancouver’ magazine, July 2004: 90).

This tension is aggravated by the fact that the percentage of ‘textiles’ at the beach hovers around 50%. An increasing presence of ‘textiles’ is viewed as potentially disruptive to the desired social structure of the beach, and Korky Day (original champion of the nude beach in Vancouver) explains that it can destroy the desire to get nude, by increasing nudists' perceptions
of vulnerability. Ironically, ‘textiles’ were instrumental in legitimizing the beach as clothing
optional. In 1985, when Parks Board Commissioner Helen Boyce threatened to clothe the beach,
claiming it as an “enclave of a few,”\textsuperscript{12} she was met by a sundry of people, many clothed,
demanding reconsideration of her objections. So ideally, the WBPS must profess acceptance of
textiles in order to legitimate their own belonging to place, while at the same time negotiating the
tension this presents.

The combined popularity and seclusion of this place has propelled activities that are
negatively viewed by the WBPS, such as hard drug sales and sexual offenses, challenging
community ideals. While beachers profess to see the naked body as natural or unsexy, not
everyone who visits the beach holds this view. Although Wreck Beachers pride themselves on
their tight community and self-policing abilities, the growth and rise in popularity of the beach
over the last couple decades has necessitated stronger RCMP presence. During one WBPS
meeting for example, RCMP officers commented on physical aggression on the beach,
particularly drunk beach users instigating verbal and physical assaults. This stands in stark
contrast to the ideals of pacifism and tolerance promoted by the WBPS. In such circumstances, it
is necessary for the Wreck Beach community to redefine their values. For example, during an
interview at the beach in mid-July, I was speaking with some regulars in the Casino section. One
man commented that someone had placed hypodermic needles in the Marine Student Residences
construction site in areas workers would be handling. Expressing anger towards this aggressive
and harmful approach, he remarked: “It couldn’t have been a Wreck Beacher. That just isn’t the
Wreck Beach attitude!” The rest of the group adamantly agreed. While the Wreck Beach
community characterizes itself by a certain set of values, not everyone who uses the beach
complies—provoking the reaffirmation of the community and its boundaries.

\textsuperscript{12} This quote was provided through interviews, and is not extracted from primary sources.
C) Wreck Beach versus the City

While seeking descriptions of Wreck Beach, I heard recurrent mention of the distinctiveness of the beach compared to other places. The physical isolation and separation of the beach afforded by the Point Grey Cliffs reinforces the experience of social separation from an urban environment. Repeatedly expressed in protest against the Marine Residences is the lack of visual city markers:

Many visitors comment that perhaps the most impressive feature of this splendid place is the fact that adjacent to our full and vibrant city, there remains one opportunity to look back at the hillside and see no sign of civilization at all. When you look up at those trees, all you can see are the eagles swooping around with nothing but blue sky behind them. No buildings, no artificiality, no ambient lights, unlike anything else at all in the whole Vancouver area” (WBPS Press Release, May 17, 2004).

The beach is set in opposition to the city, and many beachers envision the beach as its own separate society, evident in monikers like ‘Wreckville,’ the naming of log enclosures used for tanning as ‘homes,’ and the creation of garden enclosures near the Casino area. Physical demarcation is further supported by social distinctions, locating and validating those that participate.

Overtly, this place represents negation of one of the most fixed social rules—wearing clothing. Hence the familiar expression: ‘I feel naked without _____ (my watch, my hat, etc),’ suggesting a feeling of awkwardness or abnormality. Beachers have inverted such associations so that nakedness, and ultimately the place of Wreck Beach itself signify the contrary—naturalness and freedom. According to Marilyn, a beach regular, attitudes at Wreck Beach “go beyond culture’s ideas of what is beautiful and acceptable.” As Shields explains in his consideration of beaches, disrobing is a visual mark of inclusion and an erasure of status, similar to Turner’s description of ‘communitas’ (Shields, 1991). At Wreck Beach, inverse clothing
norms are buttressed with other social rules that also function to disguise social status, such as the use of first names only, avoiding 'shop-talk,' and steering away from 'downer topics.' By trivializing individual rank, group identity assumes greater eminence. As the WBPS adage goes: "you are measured only by the wattage of their smiles." Regulars identify a superior and more respectful sociability when, as one participant described, you are "not armoured in clothes."

Authors have addressed the unique social atmosphere at the beach, via the inversion or negation of social rules and status (Shields, 1991: 89; Urbain, 2003: 200; Lencek and Gideon, 1998). In *Places on the Margins*, Rob Shields provides the case study of Brighton Beach—what he describes as "the antithesis of everyday productions and everyday environment" (Shields, 1991: 276). Similarly, Urbain remarks:

> The beach is spectacular. It is a theater in which society unveils itself, lays itself bare (literally and metaphysically) bringing to light the affective and feeling dimension of social relationships in the framework of a scenography that stylizes existence and brings out its essential character (Urbain, 2003: 7).

Beachers define the social atmosphere at Wreck Beach as more genuine than everyday life, and other (textile) beaches. The shedding of clothes is realized as the shedding of societies’ facades. At Wreck Beach, desires for equality and modified views of stature are situated in the production of place that has made these particular social uses more compelling. While these values and beliefs emerged from the 1960s, and 1970s—the beach community continues to attract people that share similar ideals.

Although Wreck Beach is differentiated by unique social uses, the fruition of Wreck Beach is bound to proximal sites: particularly UBC and the city of Vancouver. The emergence of this place and the common assertion of Wreck Beach as escape or refuge symbolize discontent with contemporary capitalist economy and sustaining ideals of individualism, urbanization and mass consumerism. Critique of cities and desires for escape emerged from the political and
social fueling of the 1960s, and as previously mentioned the “free beach” blossomed (Lencek and Bosker, 1998: 263; Douglas et al., 1977: 22). It is interesting to note that the Point Grey location was initially chosen for the University so that students wouldn’t be exposed to the “city’s nefarious influence” (Tomaszewska: 2004, “Post-War Reconstruction”). Yet, in the 1960s, as the UBC campus continued to expand and develop, “the ‘fear of bigness’ was articulated in a debate featured in the Ubyssey in which one student accused the University of ‘balkanization’ – the alienation of students from the university community due to its large size” (ibid). In sum, this was a time when reactions to urbanity were on the rise, and consequentially Wreck Beach grew in popularity as a place of solace.

Wreck Beach continues to function as a refuge—one naturist describes the beach as a respite from the “branded materialistic clothed world that we all must deal with in our regular lives” (GVRD/UBC Joint Committee Agenda). Urry and McNaughten would describe this as a “narrative of loss”—discordance between our own ambitions for the world and the world in which we live (1998: 235). The creation and re-creation of Wreck Beach was partially a means of confronting this, and maintaining a perceived pocket of utopia—departure from loss. Participants suggested that they frequent the beach as an escape from ‘regular life.’ Rick Fearman, for example, reflected on the importance of the beach when he was coping with employment dissatisfaction, explaining:

[I could] get away from the city behind me. I could just turn my back on the million people in the city and I could be anywhere—up the interior, up the West Coast. Just enjoy the peacefulness of the outdoors.

In effect, the beach serves as a therapeutic respite or as Judy Williams once put it, “a healing center for people stressed out with a dysfunctional world” (Vancouver Sun, July 8, 1995, A2). For many regulars, Wreck Beach is about acceptance and freedom, values perceived as absent in ordinary life. One beacher describes the therapeutic release Wreck Beach affords:
We went through...what I think were socially bleak years where it felt like we were going backwards socially with Reagan and Bush...But still, Wreck Beach seems to foster a more tolerant and natural and spontaneous existence and that is part of the reason I go there and the part of the reason many people go there is that it is a way of remaining sane no matter what else is happening in the world.

Such insights were common during fieldwork, and some people expressed that the beach is becoming increasingly important with surmounting urbanization and development pressures. The preservation of Wreck Beach centers on maintaining a remedial place.

Drawing on the work of Lefebvre, we could argue that the WBPS are involved in a “counter-project”—demanding a “differential space” defined by quality and use rather than capitalist “abstract space” based on quantity and commodity exchange values (Lefebvre, 1991: 382). The beach is contradictory in that it offers a potential medium for the experience of differential space yet is also rooted in abstract space (ibid: 383). Sites of leisure, according to Lefebvre, have emerged from and are complementary to abstract space and therefore offer limited challenge or critique (ibid). By fostering segmented points of recuperation (during summer holidays, weekends, or after work), the beach reinforces and reproduces modes of capitalist production and alienating labour experiences (ibid). In the most extreme case, the beach may privilege the visual “consumption of space” rather than fostering a further politicization of space (ibid: 385). This is noted also by Braun in his analysis of ecotourism, where garbage on the tour path is seen as infectious to the visual experience (Braun, 2002: 115).

According to Lefebvre, the consumption of space reproduces the spaces of consumption, by reinforcing the main tenet of capitalist production. But, Lefebvre also recognizes potency in leisure sites, through the experience of the body. Consider the following passage:

The beach is the only place of enjoyment that the human species has discovered in nature. Thanks to its sensory organs, from the sense of smell and from sexuality to sight (without any special emphasis being placed on the visual sphere), the body tends to behave as a differential field. It behaves, in other words, as a total body, breaking out of the temporal and spatial shell developed in response to labour, to
the division of labour, to the localizing of work, and the specialization of places (Lefebvre, 1991: 384).

At the beach it is possible that via the body, one can experience a place alternative to highly commoditized abstract space, creating a rift between these moments and the fragmentary experiences of everyday life. The struggles and narratives of the WBPS indicate their desire for differential space ('departure from loss'), yet the beach as refuge also serves to maintain capitalist production by externalizing the experience of this place from everyday life. Wreck Beach is not evenly defined or bounded, but complex and full of dynamic social relations that produce spatial contradictions.

Spatial contradictions also stem from the production of nature at Wreck Beach. In the following analysis I will show how beachers both draw on and seek to transcend the nature-culture dichotomy. The perception of the beach as refuge ties into understandings of 'nature' at the beach compared to the urbanity of the city. While I will argue that 'nature' at Wreck Beach is a means of identifying place and people, the discourse promoted by the WBPS that the state of the beach and state of the body is natural faces dissent.

D) Nature: Identifying Beach and Body

Castree and Braun describe nature as "something imagined but real, external yet made, outside history, yet fiercely contested at every turn" (Castree and Braun, 1998: 3). I have alluded to perceptions of Wreck Beach as 'natural,' but would like to devote consideration to the manifestation of 'naturalness' in social practice and representations, and the contradictions implicit in claiming domesticated place as 'natural.' Wreck Beach is often portrayed as a 'nearly natural beach' or 'wilderness-like setting,' and beach users commented on the timeless quality of the beach despite the aforementioned transformations imposed over the last century. Rather than
labeling conceptions and representations false, I will illustrate what ‘nature’ reveals and how it is rendered meaningful at Wreck Beach.

The Wreck Beach Committee mandate initially declared, “although the beach no longer has the profile it once had before the dredging and bulldozing, it is still natural in the sense that it is not marred by the artifice of access roads or concession stands, change house, or obvious toilet facility” (Wreck Beach Committee Release, 1979). Although preserving ‘nature’ in the sense of monitoring human impact (through the lack of roads and other physical structures) on the physical environment is a paramount concern of the WBPS, this is tied into other (social) concerns. Roads, toilets, residences, and even internal disturbances to beach management (garbage collection, etc.) all serve as a threat to WBPS ideology. The imposition of any of these ‘unnatural’ structures would not only present a rupture to the original mandate but also to social uses that designate place as sacred, unique and natural. Yet, these developments are perceived as more threatening than other presumably unnatural developments that support desired use. For example, beachers have built structures for resting and tanning, ‘totems’ for hanging hammocks, and vendor stands for selling wares; yet these are built primarily from beach wood, and according to regulars, have ‘a natural feel.’ Further, some actions that were initially recognized as environmentally destructive and unacceptable such as the dredging of contaminated fill, have been made socially meaningful, providing the main area of contemporary use—Trail 6 (Main Beach). Nature at Wreck Beach is given physical and social meaning through the work of social actors. Enveloped in the idea of ‘nature’ at Wreck Beach is a group of people who have substantiated identities, ideals and relationships through the formation place.

The experience of naturalness at Wreck Beach is tied into the separation of this place and its role as a place of escape. Basically, nature has gained importance via opposition to urbanity.
This yearning for urban relief was invoked in letters to the Parks Board opposing marina and road construction proposals in 1970: “the only sign of civilization is rafts of logs and a breakwater... here we may restore our physical, emotional, and spiritual viability and regain the awareness that we are a part of nature and not masters over it” (UBC Reports, January 29, 1970).

More recently, a call for support by the WBPS issued that:

Urban dwellers in particular must find regeneration and renewal in nature as provided by our parks. That Wreck beach is only 15 minutes from the heart of a thriving metropolis makes it all the more precious for Vancouverites and those who travel from across Canada and abroad to reconnect with nature as Nature intended (WBPS Press Release, November 12, 2004).

The preservation of ‘naturalness’ reinforces a desire for Wreck Beach to act as a visual and experiential antithesis to dominant society, through its constitution as contrast to the ‘urban.’

Yet as Soper remarks, while we “turn to nature to transcend ‘loneliness’ or ‘alienation’ of our cultural status, we have also used [nature] to preserve the nature-culture barrier” (Soper, 1995: 86). The nature-culture divide is a supportive feature of capitalist production, and while ‘nature’ is sought out as “differential space” (borrowing again Lefebvre’s term), confirming and preserving nature as refuge perpetuates and naturalizes this division. As discussed by William Beinart and Peter Coates in regards to the Parks Movement: “parks enable enjoyment of urban-industrial society while salvaging a modicum of nature” (Beinart and Coates, 1995: 93). So, while the park or beach may grant a release from urban life, it is (for most) a temporary and segregated experience. I would argue that this is less definitive of the WBPS, due to their persistent rejection of encroaching urbanization, and for some members, commitments to the beach is a life-work. Yet, the preservation of Wreck Beach implicates the containment and separation of opposing ideologies.
The view of Wreck Beach as ‘natural’ is also aided by naturist discourse that labels the naked body as natural. For instance, at a recent benefit auction to raise money for the legal battle over Marine Residences, the announcer encouraged donations to preserve the beach as natural, adding that the people enjoy it in a natural state. Similar connotations are littered throughout WBPS discourse, likening the natural state of the body to the natural state of the beach (later I will consider how this legitimates group belonging). Since this place is principally defined by social use as a clothing optional beach, the reaffirmation of the natural qualities of place consolidates social use and vice versa.

While beachers may envision the naked enjoyment of the beach as ‘natural,’ clothing-optional use of the beach has incited moral outrage. In 1977, an evangelical campaign was led by Alderman Bernice Gerard to halt nude use of the beach. Floods of letters to the mayor of the time (Jack Volrich), and a bundle of petitions housed at Vancouver City archives attest to the fervent support that Gerard elicited by followers in her campaign. It is not incidental that this crusade transects with a period of public outrage over the availability of pornography in downtown Vancouver (Vancouver City Archives, Mayor’s Office Fonds, series 483, 48-G-3, file 119, General Correspondence Files, 1977/1978, correspondence July 12, 1977). Protestors lamented that society was experiencing a ‘breakdown of morals’ (ibid). One letter reads: “not only would my eyes be offended but my heart for the eyes of my children” (ibid., correspondence July 26, 1977). Despite the support, Gerard’s campaign proved unsuccessful. At the beach, she was met by peaceful beachers with ‘welcome Bernice’ signs and fig leaves covering their genitals. Although moral concerns over beach use are less apparent now, they still persist. For instance, recently, a man abhorrently opposed to beach use (particularly the use of the beach by homosexuals) cut his own trail through the park and beach so that his sons could bike the area.
Oppositions over the naturalness of nudity find complementary argument in critiques of the naturalness of the beach. Reproving the 'naturalness' of Wreck Beach is a tactical measure used by competing interests (particularly development interests) to undermine the legitimacy of WBPS’ claims and contests over place. For example, a beach regular described a tour once led for a group of consultants, who had been hired to assess cliff stability for future developments of the Point Grey area. Walking the length of the beach, the guide intended to point out areas of past and potential erosion. During the walk, one consultant directed the group’s attention to the condos area—a piece of land, protected by a built up ledge of boulders to allow for winter warmth and tanning, criticizing, “they say they want a natural beach, but look—this is not natural!” Since the inception of the WBPS, members have actively promoted and defended the beach as ‘natural;’ but in the politics of place, these words have been turned into ammunition. While the WBPS promotes and defends the natural integrity of the beach, competitors argue that fabricated tanning enclosures are unnatural, attempting to disclaim beachers’ contentions with developments. The WBPS is encouraged to confirm nature at Wreck Beach, since altercations insinuate that any slip towards the ‘unnatural’ may license the dumping of more dredgate or the construction of a marina (as if to equalize everything ‘unnatural’). In the process, nature has become intimately bound to personal and social identities of the WBPS and regulars, and as I will soon demonstrate—legitimating belonging.

**Legitimating Belonging**

Having discussed some of the ways regulars define Wreck Beach and how this has been challenged, as well as the incongruous and complex nature of place, I will now consider how these social uses are authenticated and maintained in pursuit of preservation, and as a means to legitimate belonging. I agree with Rodman that “we need to consider how different actors
construct, contest, and ground experience in place” (Rodman, 1992: 652). Having indicated the
‘character’ of Wreck Beach regulars intend to preserve, I will now draw the final link of my
argument, showing that through preservation, social actors facilitate belonging. Struggles over
preservation are struggles to control the production and re-production of place. Beachers strive to
protect the aforementioned social uses, because these meanings promote a sense of belonging.
Further, in order to establish their role as preservers, and their ability to maintain and re-make the
beach, they must authorize their belonging at Wreck Beach. In sum, I will explore how the
preservation of Wreck Beach and its social uses authorizes identities, relationships, and values.

A) Marginalization of the WBPS

The legitimacy of the WBPS has been challenged by the actions and interests of other
groups in past and present. Erosion protection and development ventures that progressed with
scarce public input, and concern for beach use have propagated a sense of marginalization for
beach users and the WBPS. For example, the public process over cliff erosion management in
the late 1970s and early 1980s resulted in compromise between Swan Wooster Engineering
Company and Wreck Beach foreshore resource consultant Wolf Bauer. The plan initially valued
beach use, but in final form neglected some of Bauer’s key contributions—dune grass was never
planted, and designs were altered to include three drift sills rather than the recommended one.
Yet, more blatant disregard for the convictions of beach users is apparent in the response of
Parks Board Commissioner George Puil to protest blockades in 1974:

These people are dictating to our staff and consultants what should be done. We
should not allow our experts to be dictated by what I sometimes consider to be a
bunch of crackpots (Ubyssey, Tuesday March 19, 1974)

This comment indicates discrimination against beachers, and the prioritizing of “expert”
knowledge over the knowledge of beach users.
Wreck Beach epitomizes leisure and recreation—activities that fall outside of the sphere of productive society. Although the WBPS has been included in public input processes, more weight is often granted to productive or “primary stakeholders” or “experts.” In the case of the recent campus developments for example, representatives of the University Neighborhoods Association (UNA) have argued that paying (UNA) and otherwise productive (UBC faculty, students, and staff) interests should garnish more say in development matters than other “interest groups,” including the WBPS (GVRD-UBC Joint Committee Agenda).

The WBPS has confronted marginalization, particularly in response to the development of the Marine Student Residences. The WBPS has objected to the UBC’s Campus and Community Planning’s suggestion that the Marine Student Residences project was a “community fit,” by rebutting with an international petition and letter writing campaign. Yet, in response to pressure from beach users to drop the height of the student residences, planners agreed to accommodate views from the high water mark—fueling a debate over confines of beach use. Recently, Pacific Spirit Park Society (PSPS) lawyer Don Rosenbloom remarked:

The Wreck Beach Preservation Society (WBPS) went to great expense to perform a visual impact analysis of the towers, and has produced pictures showing how the buildings will tower over the beach. These pictures were circulated to the GVRD Board and clearly caused the Board concern... UBC answers by saying that the towers will not be visible from the high water mark. Only a fool would define the beach as being limited to the narrow stretch of sand that remains at high water, an area completely enveloped in a canopy of shrubbery. (Rosenbloom, November 22, 2004).

This disagreement over visual impacts and use of space encompasses a struggle over authority and belonging—threatening ideals that define the beach and beachers.

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13 In 1979, the WBPS was invited to participate as an interest group in erosion control discussions, though they were disbanded after one year. The WBPS was also active on the Cliff Erosion Management Plan, and recently Judy Williams served as a representative for the WBPS on both the North Campus Advisory Committee and the South Campus Working Group—as part of the University-town developments.

14 The UNA represents non-institutional residents at UBC, substituting municipal governance.

15 This was presented to the Board of Governors following a meeting between UBC planners and the WBPS in February 2004, where Society members expressed unanimous disapproval with the project.
Yet comments made by University Planning representatives have suggested that the ideals and opinions of the WBPS do not fit with the whole of beach users. For instance, antagonists of the Marine Residences development were labeled “a few beach users.” Consider the following opinion provided by Dave Forsyth, a member of the South Campus Area Planning Committee and UBC Liaison Officer for the Pacific Spirit Park Society:

Recent developments such as the Marine Residence towers show a complete lack of thought and lack of respect to the concerns of the beach users. At the most recent GVRD Directors meeting where Judy gave a brief presentation, [an administrator from Campus & Community Planning] was being interviewed. He stated that WBPS had forced people to sign the petition before they were allowed on the beach. He also stated that “this was the type of people we’re dealing with.”

The suggestion that WBPS is dictating allegiance, and supplying false information serves to stigmatize and marginalize the role of the WBPS. Although beach users are not a homogenous group, protest against this specific development encompasses more than the core members of the WBPS or regulars, recently gathering protest from naturists worldwide, as well as the Pacific Spirit Park Society and Musqueam. However, preservation for the WBPS and regulars is impelled by desires to maintain a place embedded with ideals, relationships and identities.

B) Moral Crusade: Resisting Commodification

The WBPS and supporters have continually challenged development pursuits on moral grounds. Letters to the Vancouver City Council and Parks Board in 1969 from citizens rejecting marinas and roadways beg: “leave us a few quiet places”; “is nothing sacred from the bulldozer?”; “we want to get away from the hustle and the bustle and frustration of the city with its multitude of people” (Vancouver City Archives, City Clerk’s Records, series 20, 79-B-1, file 11, City Council, 1969, correspondence: February 18th and March 2nd, 1969). Recently, similar sentiments were reiterated in letters to the GVRD and UBC describing Wreck Beach as: unspoiled, a “natural wonder,” “soul renewing,” an escape, an “environmental jewel,” a “balm.
for the soul," a "magical stretch of beach," and that the development of Marine Student Residences would be the "shame of UBC" (GVRD-UBC Joint Committee Agenda).

Collectively, the WBPS has repeatedly expressed frustration with the perceived encroachment of urbanization, as articulated in a recent WBPS press release:

Not only will the view from the beach be destroyed forever, but the entire gateway to Vancouver will be changed from wilderness-like to a glass, steel and concrete row of behemoths growling their greetings to Vancouver’s Lower Mainland (WBPS Press release November 12, 2004).

The development of these high rises could transpose the aesthetic and ideological divide Wreck Beach is grounded on, disrupting the beach as a place of nature and retreat. For example, a WBPS newsletter describes the Marine Student Residences as "permanent visual pollution and monuments of corporate greed" (Wreck Beach Preservation Society Newsletter, Summer 2004 newsletter). In Lefebvre’s terms, the goals of the WBPS are a ‘counter-project,’ where “what counters quantity is quality” (Lefebvre, 1991: 381). Beachers reject developments that threaten the constitution of Wreck Beach as a site of refuge from the city. The potential shortening of the distance between beach and dominant society is framed by the WBPS as a moral crusade against commodification.

The act of preservation of Wreck Beach is a moralized resistance to maintain the ideologies for which this place has been created: freedom from societal pressures through nature and the naturalness of naked body. Further, the beach is defended as a place of acceptance—the people’s beach. This was fervently expressed during a delegation to the UBC-GVRD joint committee by WBPS members Marilyn Hogan and George Munro. Their performance included the following excerpt, played to the music of This Land is Your Land by Woody Guthrie:

This beach is your beach
This beach is my beach
From the highest tree-tops
To the lowest tide-reach
From the inlet waters
To the Fraser log booms
This beach was made for you and me

The Marine Student Residences would impinge on Wreck Beach ideals, penetrating the visual boundary between the beach and the rest of society. Further, the visibility of the towers could alienate beachers from land that they have tended and preserved in alignment with philosophies of freedom and equality, and threaten the divide between beach and ‘topside’ that supports these ideals. The WBPS insists that “UBC may be under no ‘legal obligation’ [to consult with public over institutional development] but they are under a moral obligation to the people of Vancouver” (WBPS Press Release, May 15, 2004). Judy Williams remarked “I can assure you; these towers will never be built. The people will prevail” (Vancouver Courier, August 5, 2004). One WBPS member, James Loewen theorized that the continual threats to the beach may be part of a larger, though possibly subconscious desire to control transgressions from dominant society.

The interface between the beach and topside has also been stimulated by the erosion of the Point Grey Cliffs. A visible mark of eroding cliff-face, located on ‘the nose’ of the Point Grey peninsula (south of Trail 4), is often referred to as the ‘Point Grey Scar’ providing metaphorical reference to the battles waged between the WBPS and topside over the instability of the cliffs. Two eminent University buildings rest near the cliffs—the Museum of Anthropology (MoA) and Cecil Green mansion—bordering a susceptible slide area. If the cliff is permitted to recede to its natural angle, these buildings would reportedly be destroyed within 45 years (GVRD). Granted, this represents an obvious problem for the University, and various berm, vegetation replanting, and cliff re-angling initiatives have transpired, the most recent effort being the Cliff Erosion Task Force. As a piece in the University paper Ubyssey stated in 1973: ‘[erosion is] threatening the fabric upon which the University was built.” (Ubyssey, Thursday
September 13, 1973, pg. 4) Interestingly, now the University may be threatening the fabric upon which Wreck Beach was built.

Specifically, preservation is a response to this perceived marginalization which threatens the belonging of the WBPS and regulars to Wreck Beach. Because the beach has been transformed into a very public and political site of contest, pleas by the WBPS have also been publicly directed in attempts to draw support and furthermore, curb marginalization. WBPS discourse includes the motto: “public input before and not after the fact.” Although the call is for public involvement, in particular the encouragement is for WBPS involvement. Outside threats, while dangerous, provide a stage to confirm and challenge the meanings of place and validate belonging.

C) Negotiating Belonging: Knowing the Beach

Through calls for preservation, the WBPS actively negotiate their own role as protectors of the beach. Let me provide a telling vignette from my fieldnotes:

During a meeting of the GVRD Board of Directors, the WBPS had prepared a delegation that was presented by spokeswoman Judy Williams to garnish support for their protest of the Marine Student Residence towers. She ended the emotional plea, urging “help us help those who can’t help themselves” (July 29, 2004).

Although a seemingly innocent statement, I found it significant for two reasons. For one, this message implies that the WBPS knows what ‘nature’ needs (Braun, 2002: 260). Furthermore, this credits the WBPS as the most apt to maintain this place. Labeling development intentions as threatening, WBPS assumes the parental role of a helpless nature. In sum, discourse promoted by the WBPS promotes their position as protectors, by maintaining their social investments in the beach. Projects that infringe on the ‘nature,’ refuge, and sanctity of Wreck Beach also threaten the relationships and identities founded on and constituting the beach.
Knowledge of the beach was often provided in discussions of Wreck Beach. Irrefutably, the act of consistently observing and experiencing a place for extended periods offers enlightenment of the intricacies of that environment. Everyone I spoke to attached personal meaning to the beach, and shared many close friendships at the beach, with some visiting since childhood. As well, the social and emotional investments that I have described foster stronger interests in managing and ‘preserving’ this place as a specific beach type environment. Through experiential knowledge, beachers have often been instrumental in providing insight into beach management issues. For example, during an interview with Rick Fearman, we discussed the relationship between GVRD Parks and the WBPS. He described his own experience with the GVRD as positive, providing the following example. Having noticed that “no swimming” signs had been removed from the Trail 7 beach area—an area normally unfit for swimming, he had contacted head offices for confirmation. The GVRD representative replied that in fact fecal coliform counts had measured less, but wasn’t sure of the reasoning. Rick replied that it must relate to the moving of the log booms earlier that year. In fact, this had permitted birds to move back to grassy areas, resulting in a decrease in fecal coliform counts. The process of reiterating understanding and identifying with place suggests that the WBPS holds a superior connection with Wreck Beach and thus is deserving of their role as guardians of the beach. In sum, these comments imply knowing and authenticate the role of regulars in beach management.

D) Naturism: Natural Bodies, Natural Beach

Over the course of fieldwork, I witnessed statements that referenced a more profound relationship between beachers and ‘nature’ at the beach. Beach regulars often commented that Wreck Beach was their teacher. As James expressed, “Wreck Beach proves that we can live in harmony with nature. That we don’t have to destroy it. You can come and walk barefoot and
respect the area.” Tailing Berdoulay’s suggestion that “a place comes explicitly into being in the
discourse of its inhabitants, and particularly in the rhetoric it promotes,” I have analyzed some of
the naturist discourse used by the WBPS (Berdoulay, 1989: 135). Naturism, initially a nude
health movement, grew out of Germany in the beginning of the 20th century, and after World
War One began to spread in America. Here, naturism spread as a form of recreation. (Ilfeld and
Lauer, 1964: 28). Naturism was also described to me by one regular as a “spiritual closeness with
nature.” Judy Williams explained this relationship to me:

You will normally find that where you have areas that have been maintained as
natural, beautiful areas often times nudists or naturists as we prefer to call it are
behind it because naturists try to live in harmony with nature. Nudists—social
nudists don’t necessarily do that so I draw a distinction between social nudists and
naturists. Naturists really do live in harmony.

Naturists profess a more intimate relationship with nature through the act of disrobing. Eder
describes this as a “moral framing device... [tracing] back to ideas of a paradisiac nature where
humans and nature were living together in harmony” (Eder, 1996: 172). The belief in a return to
Eden surfaced in naturist literature, as well as in multiple conversations with beach users. As
Korky Day declared, ‘nude peace [nude recreation] can help take society back to its previous
innocence and previous stronger identification with nature.”

Naturism is implicated as support for the role of the WBPS. Published in a WBPS
newsletter in response to recent University proposals to build a ‘Canopy in the Forest,’ designed
to extend above portions of old growth forest near Wreck Beach, was that the project is a
“potential threat to the silence and natural beauty of our beach that we now enjoy as nature
intended” (WBPS meeting notes, March 18, 2004). Similarly, during an interview discussing the
building of the Marine Residences, Parch remarked: “You can’t fight Mother Nature, and Mother
Nature will be here long after the University has gone and eroded away. So to build something
that close to the cliff—you just can’t laugh at Mother Nature like that.” Cronon has described
this as “[turning] natural events into moral fables” (Cronon, 1996: 80). Both of these comments present nature as a cognizant force, but also suggest that beachers are more aware or attuned to this will, and more apt to manage and protect place. Ultimately, these narratives further the belief both endemically, and if successful—externally that beachers are meant to be here.

This parallels Braun’s discussion of ecotourism in Clayoquot Sound, as beachers too are “invested in and yet seek to transcend the divide of nature-culture” (Braun, 2002: 28). In short, the WBPS tends to present an external view of nature, but one that can be crossed and maintained by beachers/naturists. As indicated in previous excerpts, the nature of Wreck Beach is often juxtaposed to other less natural places in the city. Rather than a singular nature, I agree with Demeritt’s comment:

many material constructions of nature will depend on the conceptual constructions that guide the ways people interact with and transform the physical environment, which in turn will influence what people conceive (Demeritt 2002: 779).

The nature that people declare and defend at Wreck Beach involves a continual process of creation. Further, I have come to understand that the use of ‘nature’ in preservation debates aids in developing and reinforcing an identity for beach regulars as more attuned to nature through their bodily state. By claiming that the beach is natural, and that naturists are more attuned to this propensity—serves to portray the WBPS as just in their intentions and will.

E) Employing History:

Another powerful means of legitimating belonging is through the employment of history. I observed the engagement of history by the WBPS in two distinct but related ways. One was through expressions of the physical continuity of the beach—an idiom of timelessness. Consider the response to the Marine Student Residences from the WBPS, stating that from the beach, one has the “same view that Captain George Vancouver and Simon Fraser had and the Musqueam
had of the [Point Grey Cliffs]” (WBPS ‘Concerns Page’). Insistence on the continuity of the landscape stresses the viability of the WBPS as preservers. Another observance should demonstrate the use of history to defend belonging:

During a recent public information meeting of Campus and Community Planning, a discussion ensued over the potential of storm water on GVRD lands. In response, a speaker representing UBC remarked that UBC was in fact present before GVRD, implying premier rights and access to the land. In heated retort, a member of the WBPS shot back “But the cliffs and forests have been here before UBC.” In response, audience members erupted in applause.

In an intriguing fashion, pre-beach history intermingles with beach history in pursuit of maintaining Wreck Beach. Appeals to the perpetuity of place manage to validate the role of WBPS as rightful preservers. If this place has, as expressed, continued with relatively low disturbance, then the WBPS has been successful in its position and mandate. In this context, notions of change, damage, and modifications to the beach are minimized.

It is worth noting that this approach is also used by other interest groups. In several articles, UBC proclaims to be meeting the original mission to develop and expand. As stated:

Like all the world’s great universities, UBC is evolving. Through carefully planned sustainable growth over the next two decades, the University will fulfill the 1914 vision of its founding architects, who imagined a University City in an idyllic setting. (University-town, February 04)

While it appears that history may serve as a strong locater for either the WBPS or UBC, it is of less value at this site for Musqueam Peoples, whose history is often overlooked or appropriated to substantiate the belonging of other user groups.

An additional invocation of history is heard through WBPS discourse that outlines past successes of the society in stamping out developments exploits. This functions not only as a morale builder for the group, but also a way of consolidating allegiance. Borrowing Lovell’s term, these stories serve as “collective mnemonic devices” that “conjure up a communal past and
identities which emphasize a contemporary solidarity and shared identity” (Lovell, 1998: 16). Similarly, Harvey states: “[the] collective memory that attaches to places connects to the imaginary of belonging” (Harvey, 1996: 310). The importance of the past as a signifier of present struggles became apparent in many discussions and interviews which often skipped from contemporary discussions of struggles to past successes and disappointments. It is significant to note that the WBPS’ numerous victories are a point of pride for members, and impressive for a small and informally structured group. These proclamations of history provide and reiterate WBPS claims of belonging and reinforce community. By invoking an assemblage of past struggles in debates for preservation, the role of the WBPS is confirmed as necessary.

Conclusions:

*Nature’s first green is gold,*
*Her hardest hue to hold.*
*Her early leafs a flower;*
*But only so an hour.*
*Then leaf subsides to leaf.*
*So Eden sank to grief,*
*So dawn goes down to day.*
*Nothing gold can stay*
-Robert Frost

What I have endeavored to describe is a place perpetually emerging from friendships, ideals, and even struggles and contradictions. The production of Wreck Beach continues to reproduce, and transform from each experience, and is a never finished work—continually blending past and present. I included the poem by Robert Frost because the imagery seems comparable to the struggles of the WBPS—in their fight to maintain the allegedly original character of the beach they have had to confront the inevitability of change while navigating their belonging. Preservation, in its definition, implies a never-ending battle against those actors pushing for change, and particularly changes which threaten values, community and friendships. In this complex space, social, historical, and political processes feed off each another. Over time,
beach devotees through their experiences have created ties to Wreck Beach—ties that are regularly consolidated and defended. Although other groups and interests have been present at the beach, the position of beachers and their visions for the beach are naturalized through the idiom of preservation. Wreck Beach is valued as sacred, a retreat from other places—offering tolerance, and community—a respite from individualized society. Linked to and emerging from these values is the body—legitimizing and legitimated by nature. To preserve these values rooted in place, the WBPS and regulars are continually negotiating belonging and resisting marginalization.

The preceding accounts are not meant to make one mistrustful of preservation or other environmentally-focused debates. But, rather to show the richness and depth inherent to these dialogues, and the complexity of places that are indistinguishable from people. I am not implying that WBPS activists are indifferent to potential changes to the environment, but that these environments are created by and defended by people—they are ‘social natures’ (Braun, 2002).

Preservation and struggles over place are inherently struggles over the experiences and meanings that infuse place. As I have portrayed, place is shaped by the interests and motivations of people, and even presumably benign goals such as ‘preservation’ reveal deeper understandings and meanings that various social actors bring to the table. In sum, every struggle of the WBPS—be it about erosion, or high rises also encapsulates a struggle for social identity, community, and belonging. Contained within this is also a fight against societal homogenization, and an attempt to carve out a place and reality different from that normally allotted. Although framed as fights against the ‘topside,’ these struggles are also about reinforcing community below.
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Wreck Beach Preservation Society Newsletter, Summer 2004 newsletter, volume 24, issue#55