



A-ENGL 2300.01: Essay 2 - Revised

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### The Chief Seattle Problem

In 1854, Chief Seattle of the Squamish Indians gave a speech during land negotiations with the United States government (Abruzzi 72). Chief Seattle's speech, as it is commonly presented, is a powerful document which calls for increased environmental sensitivity and respect for the Earth. This speech is commonly used as an advocacy tool by members of the environmentalist movement, and is often taught in schools. But should it be used in this manner? The evidence shows that Chief Seattle's speech is historically questionable and should not be used as a tool for advocacy.

The first reason Chief Seattle's speech is historically questionable involves the transcripts of Seattle's speech. The first known transcript of the speech was written by Doctor Henry Smith (Smith), and was not actually published until 1887 (Abruzzi 73). That is 33 years after the actual date of the speech. It is unknown why Dr. Smith waited so long to present the transcript. It is also unknown if Dr. Smith took notes at the time of the speech and based his transcript on those notes, or if Dr. Smith's transcript was based on his memories (which were over thirty years old) of Seattle's speech. In either case, the gap in time between the actual speech and the appearance of Dr. Smith's transcription of the speech raises serious questions about the validity of the transcription. Dr. Smith himself admitted that his transcript was not a precise rendering of Seattle's speech (Wu 6).

Dr. Smith's historically questionable version of the speech is only the first known version. There are several other versions of the speech that purport to be transcripts of Seattle's words. All of those versions came long after the actual speech, and were written by people who did not witness the event. The version of Seattle's speech that is most commonly used and quoted today was actually written in 1971 (117 years after the original speech) by a screenwriter named Ted Perry (Perry) for a film on ecology (Anderson). Perry did not intend for his words to be represented as an actual transcription of Seattle's speech. However, Perry's work became the best known and most commonly quoted version of the speech, even though it has nothing to do with Seattle's actual speech (Abruzzi 73).

A second reason for questioning the nature of Seattle's speech involves Seattle's native language. Chief Seattle did not speak English. His speech was originally given in the language of the Squamish people, Lushtotseed. There is no evidence that Dr. Smith, or any non-Squamish persons in attendance, were native speakers of Lushtotseed. Seattle's speech was translated at the time into a language called "Chinook Jargon" (Abruzzi 73). "Chinook Jargon" was not a real language, but a mixture of French, English, and some local Indian words; the total vocabulary of "Chinook Jargon" is estimated to have been about 300 words (Wu 6). Dr. Smith then translated the "Chinook Jargon" version of the speech into English when the Smith transcript was published over thirty years later (Abruzzi 73). So in addition to the thirty-year gap between Seattle's speech and the publication of Dr. Smith's transcript, that transcript is based on a twice-translated version of Seattle's original message; first from Lushtotseed to "Chinook Jargon", and then from the extremely limited vocabulary of "Chinook Jargon" to English. Since we do not have an original transcript or recording in Lushtotseed of Seattle's speech, we cannot be sure what may have been lost in the double translation.

A third reason for questioning Chief Seattle's speech, especially in the Perry version, is that it makes historical references to things that Seattle could not have seen. For example, Perry's version of the speech has Chief Seattle referring to seeing thousands of rotting buffalos on the plains, shot by men from trains (Perry). However, Chief Seattle supposedly gave his speech in 1854; the first transcontinental railroad line was not completed until 1869. Chief Seattle could never have seen a train at the time of his speech, because there were no railroad lines near his territory. Chief Seattle died in 1866, three years before the transcontinental railroad was even completed ("History").

Additionally, the rifles in use at the time Seattle gave his speech would not have allowed for the slaughter of "thousands" of buffalo. The rifles of 1854 were "muzzle loading" rifles, which required loading powder and cartridges from the front of the rifle for each shot. This was an exceptionally slow process; a skilled man **might** have been able to fire five rounds a minute (Cooper 43). Five rounds a minute is not a rate of fire consistent with the ability to slaughter "thousands" of buffalo at a time. It was not until firearms that used self-contained brass cartridges became popular, roughly around 1873 (almost twenty years after Chief Seattle's speech) that buffalo hunting began in earnest (Cooper 49-57).

Further, Chief Seattle could not have even seen a buffalo. The buffalo was not native to the state of Washington, where Chief Seattle had his territory (Jones Jr.). The buffalo was a creature of the Great Plains, over a thousand miles away from Seattle's home (Abruzzi 72). It is unlikely that Seattle would have traveled that far at any point in his life, especially given that he would have had to do so on horseback instead of by train. Likewise, Perry's version of the speech has Seattle referring to the "call of the whippoorwill" (Perry). The whippoorwill is not native to Washington, so it is unlikely that Seattle ever heard the bird's call (Abruzzi 73).

Finally, Chief Seattle's speech, especially in the Perry version, is frequently used in a context that is intended to show the Indians were much more sensitive about environmental issues than the "white man"; for that reason, we should strive to be more like the Indians in our treatment of the environment. Supposed transcriptions of Seattle's speech such as Perry's, with lines such as "the earth is our mother" and "Man did not weave the web of life: he is merely a strand in it", are often used as an example of the general Indian way of "living in harmony" with the environment, and treating it with respect (Perry). However, the Indians in general did not actually practice the sort of environmental harmony exemplified in the Perry version of Seattle's speech. Many Indian tribes were great practitioners of "slash and burn" agriculture, where they would burn out the native plants, grow their own crops, and then move on when the ground was exhausted (Williams). Likewise, while Perry has Chief Seattle complaining about the white man shooting thousands of buffalo on the plains (something we have already established he could not have seen), the Indian tribes of the Great Plains drove herds of buffalo over cliffs so they could harvest meat and hides. What the tribes couldn't use immediately, or carry with them, they left to rot on the plains (Anderson).

Seattle's speech is a powerful and poetic document, and functions well as an emotional appeal. However, the provenance of Dr. Smith's transcript of the speech is questionable. The translation of the speech from Lushtotseed to English, by way of "Chinook Jargon", is highly suspect. The frequently quoted Ted Perry version of the speech is a complete invention by Perry. The claims made by Seattle (or his transcribers), especially in the Perry version, are impossible or implausible. And the core idea of the speech, that Indians were more in harmony with nature than the "white man", does not hold up to historical and anthropological examination. These factors not only discredit Seattle's speech, but also discredit anyone who uses Seattle's speech as

a tool for advocacy. If someone is willing to use an easily debunked and historically questionable document such as Seattle's speech to further their goals, what other shortcuts are they willing to take? There is no good reason to use Seattle's speech, especially in the Dr. Smith or Ted Perry versions, as an advocacy tool. The potential harm to the environmental cause from using such factually questionable documents outweighs any benefit that might be gained by emotional appeals.

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