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**SPEAKERS:**

[DL]: Donna Langille  
[NH]: Nancy Holmes

[0:00]

[Music Intro]

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[DL] This is Donna Langille, Community Engagement Librarian, and you are listening to Frequencies, a podcast from the library at UBC Okanagan.

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[DL] Today we are joined by Nancy Holmes, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies at UBC Okanagan. Hi Nancy, thanks so much for joining us.

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[DL] So, to begin, I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about yourself and your research interests.

[NH] Well I'm a poet. I'm in the Department of Creative Studies at UBC. I teach creative writing and I've written 5 books of poetry, that's sort of my main, I guess, research area is Canadian poetry and the writing of poetry, and writing my own poetry. But, over the past ten or twelve years, I've had a sort of a parallel research interest which is the natural environment and our relationship to the environment and I've been exploring our problems with that relationship through artistic practices. So that's my research area.

[DL] So, you do a lot of community engaged research, how did you begin doing that?

[NH] Well as I say, I started being very interested in our relationship to the natural world and I began working in that area through editing a book on Canadian nature poetry and writing my own nature poetry based on the place where I was living, the Okanagan. But at some point, I began thinking that one of the big problems with our relationship to the natural world is that we don't know much about it. When we're blind to what is around us, we don't feel engaged and connected to it. I believe poetry is certainly one way to make that connection but poetry is not exactly the most well-known kind of art form, it doesn't bring in crowds of people for readings, no one ever decides to make a movie out of a book of poetry...it doesn't have a long reach. It has a deep reach but it doesn't have a wide reach. So, at some point I began thinking, I wonder if there are other

kinds of artistic practices that could reach more people, we could have more conversations, we could talk a bit more about where we live, why we love it here, in the Okanagan in particular. And, at about that time, when I was asking myself these questions, I became kind of more aware that I was in a wonderful department at UBC, the Department of Creative Studies, and that department holds visual artists, performers, as well as creative writers. I was particularly interested in the fact that theatre and performance were a great way to create audiences and to bring audiences, lots of people together, to have conversations and to experience things. So, I began creating, sort of dialogue in, conversation and talking with my fellow colleagues in these other creative disciplines and one of those people was Denise Kenney, currently our Head of Creative Studies and she is a performance person. The two of us started thinking, why don't we come up with a sort of project where we can use the resources of the university, for instance students and equipment that we have at the university, and put it in to the community in order to try and engage the community in these questions around relationships to place. So, Denise and I ended up getting a SSHRC grant, creating this thing called the Eco Art Incubator and we just started doing all kinds of amazing projects with our students and with our community around the Okanagan and our relationship to the Okanagan, Okanagan landscape, Okanagan ecology, Okanagan plants, Okanagan animals. And, that's where it began for me, really back in around 2011-2012, I began thinking to myself, I'm not just going to be a poet, I'm going to be this other thing. This community-based artist. Denise really led the way with me, or for me, and the two of us did all kinds of work together over the next few years in the Okanagan and that eventually led to other projects that I did on my own and other projects that Denise has gone on to do on her own.

[4:40 ]

[DL] Wow, that's incredible. I know that you've incorporated some community engaged projects in your teaching and I was wondering if you could discuss some of the projects that you've done with your students.

[NH] Yeah, a lot of those started with the Eco Art Incubator. So, we did a whole variety of projects that involved our students and our community but probably the one that ended up being one of the biggest ones and probably the one I learned a lot from as both a teacher and as an artist, was called Dig Your Neighborhood. We had for three years, our students in Creative Writing and also Visual Arts, create a package of art for a particular neighborhood of Kelowna. Each year we took a neighborhood and we got the students to learn about that particular neighborhood, its history, its geography, its demographics, we did all kinds of research and then the students created amazing things. They did calendars, pallets of colours. They did walking guides, they did special magazines, they

created stories, little hilarious digital histories, they did really incredible things and we created a package of this art and through a kind of funny story, which I can tell you about in a sec, we put these works together in a package and then the Welcome Wagon delivered that package to people who moved into the neighborhood over the next year. So, it was a really terrific project that engaged the students, engaged the community, because we had community events where we invited the community to come in and tell us, teach us, about their neighborhood and yeah students had a wonderful experience. Not just learning about these various places they knew nothing about, in fact most of us didn't know anything about. And they got to create really interesting, original, art that in fact people were going to read.

[DL] And so, I mean, this must have been a new kind of thing for your students. I imagine it's not, it's not every course that you get to take that you get to be so creative and not only that but engage with the community. How did they respond to that? What kind of feedback did you get after that assignment?

[NH] I think they were initially, because a lot of them were artists, visual artists and writers, although not all of them, some of them were majoring in other areas, but for the most part they were writers and visual artists, they were at first leery about doing this, thinking this was a little too controlled, a little bit too uncreative, that they would have to write and create art about something they normally wouldn't do. However, by the time we got to at least, a little before half way through the course, they were going "Ah this amazing, I'm learning so much! I can do so much with this information I've heard about". And I think in the end, overwhelmingly, the students said it was one of the best things they've ever done. It was relevant, they learned a lot, they had to create something that was of professional quality, because it was actually going to be read by the community, it wasn't going to be in a little workshop or in a classroom on university campus. So, they felt a lot of pressure to make something really good and that really, having that benchmark, that standard, they had to live up to was challenging but they really responded like inevitably they did really great work. It was really a super project. They made great friends, they ended up collaborating with visual artists because of course they had to produce it as well so they collaborated with the visual artist, with each other, a lot of skills they built and ended up taking into the workplaces like publishing and editing skills. It really hit every button about creativity, community engagement, applied skills, you know workplace, skill development. It was a great one.

[DL] And so you said you had a funny story about that you were going to touch on?

[NH] Why the project ended up being delivered by the Welcome Wagon is because I had originally thought it would be really, this whole project came out of the Eco

Art Incubator, it would be great if when people moved to the Okanagan, they could learn more about the place they were coming. So often, people come to the Okanagan, they think “let’s have a beautiful green lawn, let’s plant all these thirsty water needing plants,” that’s probably not the best way to live here, so how can we tell newcomers how to live in this place? How do we get people who come to live in the Okanagan a little more aware of where they are, the best practices of living in this particular place? I thought, “Wouldn’t it be great if we had an Eco Welcome Wagon, a sort of package for people?” So, when I first thought about the Dig Your Neighborhood Project. I think I was interviewed by a local newspaper and I said in that interview, I want to create an Eco Welcome Wagon. Well, within 24 hours, I had all of these messages on my telephone at work, the light was flashing away, it was the Welcome Wagon. All these people who work for the Welcome Wagon phoned me up and said you can’t use the Welcome Wagon, that’s a copyrighted, trademarked word and you can’t use it, and I was kind of shocked, and I thought, “Oh my goodness what have I done.” But, what happened is that I ended up talking to all the Welcome Wagon people and I ended up talking to the manager of the Welcome Wagon for the Okanagan and we agreed that well, let’s get the Welcome Wagon to deliver the package my students are going to make. So, we made this connection, another great community connection, and so yeah, we ended up getting the Welcome Wagon to deliver our packages. And that happened all the time. I think that’s a great thing about working in the community. When people hear about what you’re doing, and they get excited, they contact you and something else opens up. Another door opens up. So, I think we did, probably our best package, was for Rutland, the neighborhood of Rutland. As soon as the word went out that we were doing Rutland next, we had the Chamber of Commerce, the Rutland Business Association coming to see us. We had all kinds of offers, the Sikh Temple offered to give our students a tour, it was just fabulous. It just opened doors one after another.

[11:31]

[DL] That’s a good example of how a lot of these community connections are so circumstantial and spontaneous sometimes, and you know, the fact that you were able to follow up and that led to something so incredible, that’s pretty great.

[DL] How have these community engaged projects changed your approach to research or to pedagogy?

[NH] I think it’s taught me a lot about teaching. And part of it is that sense of the value in being in the community for students. It just pays off big time for them in so many ways. Partly because they get a sense of where they are and I think a lot of are students in universities, and in places they don’t know anything about, they

come from other places. 60-70% of students come from somewhere else so it gives them a sense of where they are when you do community engaged work. I think I also see that it gives them all kinds of skills, you know, that are going to be of great use to them. In their future lives, no matter where they go, they're going to have to work with other people, in other communities, in collaboration. So, these projects have taught me a lot about the value of collaboration and community work. So that's not something a poetry teacher gets a chance to do. Most of us you know, and I'm speaking primarily of myself, not my colleagues who are very community engaged, but certainly when I was being trained as a poet, we sat at our desk and in little rooms and we talked to each other about poetry and that's all we did. I think that's totally valuable, I'm really happy I had that opportunity and I want that opportunity for our students too, to sit in rooms and talk about poetry but there is great value in also doing things in the community and together. I think that's the way of the future. Yeah, so it's taught me a lot about the value of these things. I think it loosened me up a lot. It made me think, "Okay, I can really just let the students go with this and see what they do", and trust that their creativity is going to rise to the fore, and impress me, and yeah, it always works. They always live up to the challenge.

[14:03]

[DL] Your most recent projects have focused on bees. How did you start working on bees?

[NH] Well again, it's just what we were just saying about community connections. I did all of these projects in the community and the projects, like Dig Your Neighborhood, got quite a bit of attention outside of the Okanagan. People around the country heard about it and a woman I knew a little bit, in Vancouver at Emily Carr University, heard about it and heard about the Eco Art Incubator, she contacted me and said, I have a project that I'd really like to work on with you. It's about bees. And, I said, "Well, okay, I don't know much about bees." And she said, "Well, neither did I!" and this was Cameron Cartiere from Emily Carr University. She had just gone to hear a talk by Dr. Elizabeth Elle, who was a pollination scientist at Simon Fraser University. At this talk, Dr. Elle said, "People don't know very much about native pollinators. They know a lot about honey bees, but they don't know much about native pollinators. If I could try to reach them, to help people understand the importance of these native pollinators, I would do it in a flash. I wish I had a way of raising awareness about them." So, Cameron, who is quite a go-getter, went up to Dr. Elle after the lecture and said, "I'm an artist, I can help you!" So that was the beginning of what ended up being a project we called, Border Free Bees. Cameron got in touch with me, we wrote a grant, we got a Partnership Development Grant from SSHRC to work with the City of Richmond and the City of Kelowna to develop a couple of pollinator

pastures. Again, that was the beginning of a big learning curve for me. This time, maybe less so, about how to be a community artist, but about bees. And about learning, about my place, and where I lived. Once again, it's a huge eye opener, how could I have not known these things? How could I be someone who is now, 60 years old, not knowing anything about insects that are all around me? So yeah, I've spent really the last 3-4 years learning about these amazing creatures, our native pollinators.

[DL] Could you please describe some of the bee related projects that you worked on?

[NH] Yeah, so it started off with these Pollinator Pastures. There was one in Richmond and one in Kelowna. We had an agreement with the city. We planted large meadows of flowering plants that would be good for native bees. And, certainly in Kelowna, what happened, was that I had all kinds of volunteers who would come out to help in the pasture but that came because I realized how little I knew. So, the very, very first thing we did, even before we started planting the pasture, we held a series of talks here at the Okanagan Regional Library. We called it the Pollinizing Sessions, and we invited all kinds of bee experts to come and talk to us. Bumblebee experts, experts on agricultural uses of bees, we had traditional ecological knowledge keepers from the En'owkin Centre come and speak to us about insects, we had Xeriscape Gardeners come and talk to us, organic gardeners and farmers. We just educated ourselves about bees, how they functioned in the environment, who are they. We had a series of workshops in which we planted native plants and we created bumblebee homes. Probably the most important ones, was the Bee ID workshop with Dr. Elle who came to Kelowna to teach us about how to identify native bees. So, after we did all of these, a whole year of these workshops, we had this huge pool of volunteers, as well as a huge pool of people who were kind of just like me, gobsmacked about these incredible creatures. That just sparked all kinds of other projects. We've had a Bee ID workshop every year. We had a special project that we did in Kelowna, something called a Nectar Trail. The Pollinator Pasture was great but it's sort of a demonstration, you kind of have to go there and read up a little bit about it to get much from it, obviously it also helps the bees in the neighborhood where the pollinator pasture is, but I kept saying, how do we get more people to understand what is a native bee, what's good for a native bee? So, we came up with this project called the Nectar Trail in which we invited people in the Mission neighborhood of Kelowna to sign up to be a Bee Ambassador. They made a commitment of planting a one square meter patch of flowering plants, on a property that they were responsible for. To make sure that it was drought friendly flowers, to make sure it bloomed three seasons of the year, and we gave them some other criteria. If they signed up, we gave them a sign for their lawn, we gave them a package of bee ID, we gave them a package on bee friendly planting. We just thought we would see how that went. We had a route mapped

out in the Lower Mission. Dr. Elle said that probably the gardens needed to be between 1-200 metres apart to make them actually, a kind of corridor for native bees to move around the community. Because that's really what we wanted to do, was to provide a place for the bees to move freely through a community because if they only live in isolated patches, their gene pools gets really reduced, they can't leave, they can't find other places to forage if say, all the plants die out in one place or only one season blooms, so we are trying to find a way for them to move around the city, you know, little flowery stepping stones for the bees to move. We needed them to be 1-200 metres apart, so we charted about a 7km route, we figured we needed about 70 houses or properties to sign on, and we ended up getting well over 100 people. We thought, "Whoa! This is a great success, this really works, people want to do this!" So, the next year, we were really lucky to get the World Wildlife Fund to give us a grant, to do the project again, so we opened it up to all of Kelowna and we got, I think another 250 people to sign up. At this moment, we have about 350 people in Kelowna who manage a little pollinator patch on their yards. And yeah create bee habitats.

[21:29]

[DL] I know the first time we had chatted and there were things that I didn't know either, and you're right, you hear a lot about the bumblebees, or rather the honeybees, being able to share that in an accessible way such as art, or pollinating pastures, about such a critical issue, I think that's pretty amazing.

[NH] You know I think it's a thing that most people don't know they don't know about. I give a lot of talks to kids in schools, especially when I was right in the middle of the project. I would go into the classroom and say, "Tell me everything you know about bees." They would say "There's a queen, and there's a hive, and they make honey, and they have workers, and they dance to communicate, and they sting you, and they're yellow and black." They go on and they know a lot, they know an awful lot about bees. But then you say to them, "What you do know a lot about is not about bees but is about one species of bees, the honey bees." And there are in Canada, over 900 different species of bees, in the world over 20,000, and here in the Okanagan over 365 different species of bees. Very few of them sting, very few of them live in hives, very few of them have queens, very few of them, albeit none of them, make honey. So, you know, here we know a lot about one little species, an invasive species that is native to Europe and the Middle East. It's not native to North America or South America or Australia. Any of those places where it now lives. It's a wonderful and enchanting creature, there is no doubt about it. The honeybee is a marvelous creature but it is not a native species. There are many, many other species of bees here and we have to care about them all because they do a huge amount of the pollination, not only of our food crops but of all of the berries, all of the food that are in the wild that all

the animals and birds live on, so we have to start caring about these bees as well, and we can't care about them if we don't know them. You know, we have no clue about those bees but once you learn about them, once you learn about Agapostemon, the beautiful green bee of the Okanagan you start seeing them everywhere. In July, I can't go into my garden without seeing an Agapostemon on a sunflower or some native plant that I've planted. So, it's just opening your eyes. There's a famous, quite well-known article, about plant blindness, how people don't see plants so they don't have the names for it. And if they haven't been trained to look at a plant... I think though that we are even more bee blind than plant blind, we just do not see these bees all around us. So, Border Free Bees was really meant to open people's eyes and get them to appreciate these native bees.

[24:34]

[DL] How do these projects help express the gravity of the bee situation in the Okanagan?

[NH] I think it helps in a couple of ways. I think, when people are aware of what they didn't know, they begin to be afraid that there are other things that they don't know. I think that's a legitimate fear, and I think that's true of environmental problems in general. When we don't see them, when they're not in front of our face, when they don't have a name, we tend to ignore them and that's probably really true of big things like climate change, and really true of really tiny things, like the loss of a bumblebee species. I think it's just kind of an alarm, it's an alarm bell, and I think the reason why education is so important, why so many of us are in universities, is because we think education is so important. Education is just absolutely key, to really understanding what's real in the world. How can we respond to what's real in the world? I think the bee project is a way for us to talk about our ignorance and our blindness and our lack of understanding and our lack of knowledge, and it's a very easy thing, way to talk about these very difficult subjects because the bee is such an enchanting creature and so loveable and so important to us. We cannot, we can't survive on this planet without the bees. So, it becomes a beautiful, what's the word...what they talk about, gateway, gateway drug! You know, it's a gateway species to talking about really, really big problems because the bees are suffering because of climate change, they are suffering because of development and habitat loss and fires and all these things that are in our immediate world. It's a great little species to use as a way to think with, bees are good to think with. That's one thing, another thing that's really important how bees can help us think about our environmental crisis and environmental alarm, is you know, there is something about them that engages imagination, you know? It engages the imagination because they are like us in some ways. They're great makers, they create fabulous structures in the world, and so we know the

honeybee and its hives and things like that, but all the Native bees do amazing things as well. They create amazing tunnels in the ground, and create wonderful little cells with little walls and they're great makers. When children and artists learn about bees, their imagination just sparks and they create art and they create a sense of love and stewardship around them. So, they spark, they're not just good to think with, they're good to love and create and imagine with. And those are such human things, those are human things, to love, to care, to create, to learn. The bee leads the way for us in so many ways. So that's why, I think there so delightful to work with, and so important to think with.

[28:14]

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[DL] Well I want to say thank you so much for joining us and for being on this podcast. I know I learned a lot and I'm really excited to share this with our audience and for them to learn about the projects that you've worked on and maybe a little bit about bees!

[NH] Thank you, it was a pleasure.

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[DL] You have been listening to Frequencies, a podcast from the Library at UBC Okanagan. Today's episode was hosted and edited by Donna Langille. Music by Trevor Neill. Artwork by Alison Ward. Thank you for listening.

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