

August 31, 2007

My Dear People,

My English name is Vi Hilbert. My Lushootseed name is one that cannot be adequately represented by the English alphabet. I am almost ninety years old and am almost blind now. I have not been able to read Dr. Coll Thrush's book: Native Seattle that Mary Ann Gwinn of The Seattle Times too-favorably reviewed in Thursday's paper. Members of the Board of Lushootseed Research, the organization I founded to preserve the beautiful language and rich culture of my people, have told me about the book and this review of it.

We traditional Lushootseed-speaking people thank Dr. Thrush for bringing out the histories and stories of our people from the Seattle area. He seems to have written with a good heart and a good mind. We cherish this kind of work and truly appreciate his efforts, but he could have been more respectful of a century of scholarly work with our language.

From the beginning, our language was only spoken, sung, dreamed, and heard. It was never written, and did not need to be. We are an oral culture. Lushootseed (also called Whulshootseed to indicate the Southern dialect spoken in and around Seattle) is so rich that when it was first written down, the 26 letters of the English alphabet could not catch its 46 sounds. That alphabet is a loose woven basket that won't hold water. Easy ignorance has continued its use in displays at the new MOHAI and for Waterlines at the Burke Museum.

After a century of using a Smithsonian spelling system endorsed by George Gibbs, a famous 1850s pioneer and official who composed our first dictionary, in the 1970's, linguist Dr. Thom Hess worked out a precise system for writing Lushootseed based on the International Phonetic Alphabet, where every sound in every language can be represented. That orthography is a tight woven basket that will hold all the sounds of Lushootseed. For many years in my classes at the University of Washington and on our reservations I was able to quickly teach our people to write, read and pronounce Lushootseed correctly. Our great oral literature from our historians and storytellers has been faithfully transcribed and published in this way. Artists have come to me for texts and images of our language to be included in their public artworks. You can find them throughout the City - works by Linda Beaumont, Edgar Heap of Birds, Buster Simpson and by my own late son Ron Hilbert Coy. These accurate, respectfully written words appear in the SAM Sculpture Park, and Seattle neighborhoods.

Scholars use this alphabet. Serious publishers use it. Local tribes use it. Dr. Thrush does not. It hurts my heart~mind that Dr. Thrush has followed his collaborator Dr. Nile Thompson in ignoring the two published dictionaries of our language (by this same press) and instead used in their Atlas of Indigenous Seattle something less respectful, from the days of the typewriter, of all this work, technical and tribal, that has come before them. Such a basket must be returned for further work.

My Board wants me to send a word of caution out to those, who with the best of hearts, would want to find the names of our special places and honor the First People with the information that is found at the end of this book. Honor the First People by using the names as our scholarly ancestors and we write them. You can find this information more accurately in the Dr. T.T. Waterman place names revised and restudied by myself, Dr. Jay Miller, and Zalmay Zahir, one of the volumes published by Lushootseed Press to share our cherished traditions.

In the new basket called the internet at [www.lushootseed.org](http://www.lushootseed.org) you will be able to find the means to acquire the fonts that properly put Lushootseed into writing. Thank you, dear people, for honoring the spirit of our ancestors. Thank you Coll Thrush for attempting to do the same in the body of your book.

Traditionally,

Vi Hilbert and the Board of Lushootseed Research  
Jill La Pointe, President of the Board

Revised February 3, 2015