

OF WOMEN, WOLVES, AND THE “SECOND WORLD” OF DISCURSIVE POLEMICS

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When I was first asked to be on this panel, in response to the *University Affairs* 201
article, I mentioned—to Karin Beeler, I believe—that my institutional memory of
Comparative Literature in this country—as a sessional instructor then working in
an English Department—was best measured in nanoseconds. Perhaps in response,
then, I would like to begin with an anecdote, perhaps even a story, which I hope will
provide a sort of “exemplary incident,” and which may be expanded upon in what
follows to complement my colleagues’ concerns. I would like to speak as much to the
future of the discipline in this country, as about the past.

It was the time I was travelling north and west to visit T’sumclaqs, matriarch of
the Heiltsuk wolf clan, in her home territory of Bella Bella, on the central coast of
British Columbia. The wolf clan is the only matrilineal clan in the Heiltsuk system
of governance. They had formed a sort of shadow society, I had been told, staying
largely invisible, below the surface of everyday affairs...and rising only to power in
times of crisis, in times, traditionally, of famine or war, when a sort of martial law was
imposed, and all community members must tow a single line. In a situation perhaps
familiar to some of us, in crucial moments, when leadership was essential, Heiltsuk
power was turned over to the matriarchs.

T’sumclaqs, heir to the name and powers of this lineage, is a Heiltsuk educator and
spiritual leader. She had agreed to tell us the wolf clan’s first generation story, back
in the early days, when rights and title to certain forms of power and narrative had
been assumed. (I was helping make a film on the biological and cultural associations
of rainforest or coastal wolves for *Canadian Geographic Presents*.) Before T’sumclaqs
would share with us her knowledge, however, she asked me to collect stones from
each place I had recently been, and to bring them with me on my journey. I duly
harvested chunks of earth from Sharbot Lake, Christie Pits, the “parklands” along

Manhattan's East River, and the barrier islands of North Carolina, glad not to be paying for excess baggage on this flight.

When I arrived in town, both cautious and eager to begin, T'sumclaq's told me no, she was not yet ready to meet. First, I must hike up the mountain to the lake (in fact a reservoir) above town, throw my rocks in the water, and make my peace with the land. I must explain myself to the spirits of place, make my intentions known, and cleanse or purify my heart, if indeed I had carried with me any malice or additional baggages from parts unknown. When each rock went below the surface, so too would the energies of the place from which it came. This was T'sumclaq's language. There was very little irony—but a great deal of agency, awareness, and self-reflexivity—in her words. She was schooling me in Heiltsuk ways. Only then could our work together begin.

Two days later, we had organized a small inboard to take our small crew and T'sumclaq's to a number of old village and ceremonial sites, where, in the shaded glades of old-growth forest, the ceremony that is a story might find a place to unfold. 202 Bella Bella is a poor enough place, and T'sumclaq's an old enough woman; as a gesture of respect, I mentioned one of her friends would be welcome to come along.

T'sumclaq's came down to the dock the next morning with a family of five, south-erners like myself, from out of town. And our boat captain had decided to bring along his young son, and to squeeze us all into a twenty-foot craft. Trips out to the old sites were infrequent these days, apparently—and free ones rarer still.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that documentary filmwork on boats is difficult in the best of times. There are few camera positions, sound quality is poor, tripods and long lenses are ineffective, and the constant wave action means no shot can be held still for very long. It began to seem as if this little junket to the northwest, the culmination of months of preparatory work, was heading south rather quickly. I mentioned this to T'sumclaq's, with some trepidation, an awareness of power relations, and as respectfully as I could. On the dock in Bella Bella—and I will not soon forget this—she spoke with some precision and power, saying: “back off—or I will show you my claws.”

The wolf clan was about to stage a one-person revival, at my expense. I assumed my rightful position, tail between my legs as a coast wolf would, and soon enough we were on our way.

Some fifteen minutes later, at a narrow passage off Yeo Island, a place that constitutes an entrance into traditional Heiltsuk territory, where the tidal current rips, rock paintings continue to mark territory and time, and an ancient noblewoman lies at rest still on a small shelf high on a cliff face, T'sumclaq's had donned a ceremonial robe and was chanting softly in ancient living language, throwing paper plates laden with smoked salmon as offerings into the sea.

The transition from a situated, nativist resistance to a graceful communication with ancestors, from a moment that baldly brought forward the fraught, necessarily ambivalent, contradictory, and incoherent relations that colonialism, as Alan Lawson would say, has “settled” upon the landscape, to a moment of spiritual and aboriginal

connection with it, was both sharp and swift. For T'sumclaq's at least, it also seemed fluid, unforced, and somehow effortless.

“Everything about human history is rooted in the earth,” Edward Said reminds us, in *Culture and Imperialism*. “At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others” (7). From T'sumclaq's position, my own culture's complicity in the usurpation of rights and title to the land we were on, the narratives associated with it, the voice and agency of its inhabitants, and any “resources” it might hold, was indubitable; the people who had done these things look a lot like me. And yet here we were, deploying an ostensibly “First World” medium—that of documentary television and broadcasting, and with Aboriginal People's Television Network one of the program's pre-scribed broadcasters, no less—in order to shape narratives both visual and verbal with the aimed of articulating, and even *integrating*—however briefly, partially, and always inadequately—a host of subject positions (situated knowledges, methodologies, cultural formations) which might represent select views of local actors (Aboriginals, conservation biologists, environmentalists, filmmakers, lawmakers, animals, trees). Above all, and such *is* my bias, we set out to tell stories of the *land*: its processes, relationships, and cycles: how harbour seals slalom *into* the forest at high tide in pursuit of migrant salmon; how ravens mate for life, groom each other like attentive lovers, and conspire in their arcane syllabics as if hooded, omniscient polyglots. We wanted to document how coast wolves play with sticks and leaves upon waking, stretch like yogics before going to the stream for lunch, are inveterately curious, social, and subtle and complex in their communications, and are at times terrifyingly acute readers of the world. We wanted to know, and to show, how information is transmitted through coherent non-human systems, how humans read, interact with, and harvest from these systems, and thereby derive narratives, symbols, and sustenance, which are themselves the signs of cultural adaptation.

And here was T'sumclaq's, complicit too, upon certain terms, within this process, willing to participate, to share her stories with us and others, to “let them go” out beyond the bounds of her culture into other media, cultures, nations, symbol systems, ideologies. And not just any stories, these, but narratives which link the beginning to present-day action in an unbroken chain of events which transpire in a recognizable landscape, and thereby comprise “a construct of actions and spoken words by which humanity remembers” (Wiebe 67). Stories which I do not have permission here to tell; they are not mine. Neither T'sumclaq's nor I would have final say on the form these mediations would take, however. (The film was not “mine,” nor were the politics of its executive producers; my agency and voice would remain active, if limited, and entirely compromised). And so if my work, as of some contemporary, low-brow, cash-strapped Flaherty *light*, was neither innocent nor neutral, neither, of course, was T'sumclaq's, who remained interested in narrativizing and revivifying tradition for contemporary political ends. Her concerns, though not exclusively, may well align with what Nancy Wachowich has called “the institutionalization of tradition,” that

is, with a willingness to trade in “traditional culture—a trafficking of cultural capital through different semiotic systems, across cultural, national, and transnational borders, and in and out of commodity status” (122). As Wachowich explains, the general movement of such relations may tend toward identity construction and identity politics: the “laying claim to a historical vision”; the promotion of a specific local culture as distinct, intimately connected to the land, and characterized by particular (i.e., “Heiltsuk”) ways of being and knowing, that is, with the codifying and conveyance of cultural difference for political efficacy, in order “to demonstrate a unique and living relationship to [an] environment” (128).

204 In her study of the trade in Iglulingmiut traditions (2006), Wachowich goes on to demonstrate that in this larger series of symbolic transactions the economic and semiotic value of these rites, songs, locations, and stories is altered, their “social worth” is “reworked.” The process effects a translation of cultural capital into forms of political capital, currencies useful in government negotiations, development consultations and deferrals, and in land use applications and decisions. Following Pamela Stern, who builds upon Wachowich’s insights, such an articulation of cultural difference for the purposes of empowerment can easily tip the scales into stereotype, hierarchy, reification, and reductive commodification, with the implications of an homogenized community and of an idealized spirituality that has nowhere and never existed. Such interventions can lead to further marginalization and isolation, as Stern goes on to demonstrate, in that they allow “those in power (and the public in general) to treat disparities in health, social benefits, and economic difference as the consequence of that cultural difference” (263). Whether this is an exemplary instance of Gayatri Spivak’s “strategic essentialism,” or of J.Y. Henderson’s “strategic traditionalism,” readings of essentialism depend as well as upon reader response, and are not entirely in the hands of the producer of the text. We should do well then to consider Stern’s conclusion: “Identity may be a tool for political mobilization of the socially excluded, but it is also a tool of segregation and exclusion” (264). It can be a means to renounce the common ground between peoples and places, to reify and *revivify* the distance between peoples, between “us” and “them.” On the part of both parties, had we not also experienced something of this on the dock that day?

And so: if metropolitan high theory privileges the decentred subject, abstraction, conceptualization, classification, nominal inscription, and remains grounded, at least “for most practitioners,” according to Stephen Slemon, “in the ideology of unitariness, and coherence, and specific argumentative drive” (148), then the objects of T’sumclaq’s attention can by contrast be located in actual landscapes and incidents, in pressing, contemporary social concerns, and in a politics that privileges events and experience over discourse (however important). If hers might seem a struggle between foreign and indigenous epistemologies, between hegemony and resistance, can it not also be figured that these categories of “foreign” and “indigenous” were so thoroughly blurred, compromised, impure, so mutually implicated and inextricably bound—in short, so radically *related*, at least within the space of our brief and

common documentary film project—that with regards to this “exemplary incident” we cannot finally disentangle such binary ways of thinking into separate, pure, unambivalent, uncontested spheres?

In my view, this incident carries meaning in so far as it can be located within what Alan Lawson (1991, 2004) has called the “Second World” of discursive politics, by which he means “that part of colonial space occupied by the postimperial, so-called settler colonies” (2004, 152). In this Second World, which is not an exclusive or essential domain, but is rather a potential “space” for reading and writing certain cultural texts, among the elements at question in these texts is not only the position of the settler subject, but also “the valency of subjectivity specifically within [...] First-Nation constituencies dispersed within First-World terrain” (Slemon 141). According to the terms established by Lawson, and expanded upon in Slemon’s “Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World,” if we identify a series of binaries as a means of configuring colonial, neocolonial, and so-called postcolonial space – between “colonizer and colonized, foreigner and native, settler and indigene, home and away” – then these interactions and relations in Heiltsuk territory revealed the on-going negotiation and dynamic relation between such “agonistic, static, disjunctive, and apparently overdetermined binaries” that colonialism (and postcolonial criticism) has established (Lawson 2004, 152).

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I am aware that this may constitute a creative mis-reading of both Lawson’s and Slemon’s texts, not to mention T’sumclaq’s perspective. And yet in the cultural space within which I found myself, either side of these only apparent binaries had come to depend upon and be embedded within the other. Mutually constituted, they were themselves provisional, partial, and incomplete.

Ted Chamberlin, who was supervising my dissertation work at University of Toronto at the time, and facilitating this second, moonlit career, has been known to say that the choice between the *yard* and the *tower*—between those supposedly situated, complicated, useful, particular places where actual lives unfold, and those apparently rarefied, isolated, privileged redoubts of contemplation known as the academy, particularly in its “nineteenth-century ivory or ivied versions”—is, simply enough, a false one (7). “It is a debilitating preoccupation,” says Chamberlin, “about a foolish choice, between false alternatives. It is a choice between being isolated and being overwhelmed, being marooned on an island and drowned in the sea. Nobody should have to make that choice. The humanities should ensure that nobody has to” (7). Off the verandah and into the field for all would-be comparatists, Chamberlin might claim (2008).

Such a direction would seem to privilege ethnographic principles and lived experience as a research methodology, and to advocate for direct intervention within communities. Yet Chamberlin’s injunction, more fully realized, would be to remain focused on “the pleasures—the actual experience—of performance,” on stories and song as ways of knowing, yes, as a claim to land and a form of deed, certainly, but without “forgetting that a work of art is first and last an experience, not a statement

about experience or an abstraction from experience" (2008, 9). In an address to the CCLA Congress at UBC last year, Chamberlin went on to intimate that perhaps we are prone to "running away from that experience—with all its indeterminacies and incompletenesses, its surprises and strangeness, and its anxieties of spiritual influence," and that often claims clarity while evoking mystery (2008, 9). The prescription in this case is a refusal to collapse "contradictions between the familiar and the strange, the real and the imagined, beauty and fear," and, by extension, between us and them—these contradictions that we encounter as much in political life as we do in the *experience* of cultural texts (2005, 7). Who knows? Perhaps this is not a bad place to start when thinking of future directions for Comparative Literature in this country.

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