

The Tree of Meaning and the Work of Ecological Linguistics

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Abstract

This plenary lecture, presented at Yukon College during the annual conference of the Canadian Network for Environmental Education and Communication, reflects on a decade of reading and translating nineteenth century Haida oral poets. These reflections talk about the ecology of stories, and relationships between stories, mind, and landscape.

Résumé

Cette conférence plénière, présentée au Collège du Yukon pendant la conférence annuelle du Réseau canadien d'éducation et de communication relatives à l'environnement, porte sur une décennie de lecture et de traduction des œuvres des poètes oraux haïdas du XIXe siècle. Ces réflexions touchent l'écologie des histoires et les liens entre les histoires, la pensée et le paysage.

I

Fifteen years ago I started to study the Haida language, with one rather narrow aim in mind. I had been reading English translations of some long and complex narratives dictated by Haida mythtellers a hundred years before, and I wanted to read them in the original. Three weeks ago, I completed the third volume of my own translation of some of those same Haida texts. It has been a long and very educational period of servitude, and I would like just to reflect for a bit on some of the things I've learned—and some of the things I haven't learned—by spending more than a decade as the slave of several deceased Haida poets: oral narrative poets, mythtellers, storytellers. Take your pick among those terms.

You may need a little background, first of all.

When the European invasion of the Americas began, there were about sixty languages being spoken in the territory now known as Canada, another sixteen, more or less, in Alaska, and at least 220 in what are now the 48 contiguous states of the USA. About three hundred, then, in North America north of the Rio Grande, and another two hundred from the Rio Grande to the Isthmus of Panama. Roughly five hundred, you could say, in North America as a whole. And there were more than that—perhaps seven hundred—in South America as a whole.

Generally speaking, language density increases as biomass increases, though there's more to it than that. Languages go where speakers go, and speakers go, when they can, where the living is good. They also go where migration routes allow them to go, and in difficult times, they go where refugees are suffered to exist. So there are some interesting pockets of aboriginal language density on the map of North America. California was a magnet for immigrants in precolonial times the same as it is now, and in the year 1500, it had more human languages per unit of land than anywhere else north of Oaxaca. This pattern held right up the coast, to the southern tip of Alaska. The West Coast of North America, not the East Coast, was the most densely peopled region before the Europeans arrived. As an old migration corridor, the West Coast acquired more languages per unit of population as well as more humans per unit of land—and the languages were more varied—they represented a wider range of language families—than anywhere else on the continent.

It's wrong, of course, to speak about these things in the past tense, but present tense is not entirely right either. Of about three hundred languages formerly spoken in all the native nations gobbled up by the USA and Canada, about 170 still survive. That is a little over half. But most of those surviving languages have fewer than five per cent of the number of speakers they used to have. Most of those languages are eroding, simplifying, losing the rich vocabularies and grammars they had acquired over centuries of relatively peaceful maturation, and the odds are very good that most of these languages will vanish in your lifetime.

A lot of effort is going into language revival and language maintenance nowadays. Very important effort, which needs all the support and all the encouragement it can get. The Yukon Native Language Centre, based at Yukon College, is one institution devoted to such work. The Haida Language revival program run by Diane Brown at Skidegate is another. But languages, like all living things, have to live within environments, to which they must adapt. A language that only survives in the classroom, like a plant that only survives in a flowerpot, or an animal that only survives in the zoo, is a different thing—and in some respects a lesser thing—than one that survives in the wild.

For a language, life "in the wild" means life as a functioning part of a cultural ecosystem, where chatter, laughter, conversations, stories, songs, and dreams are as continuous as breathing. It means the luxury of *being taken for granted*, in the same way that a tree is taken for granted by the birds that perch in its branches, by the earth, water, light, and air it grows in, and by the beetles, lichens, and mosses that grow upon it. What I am saying is that the native languages of North America have much less security now than they had before the colonization. Teaching them in the schools doesn't change that. Raising the GNP doesn't change it either. On the contrary, raising the GNP appears to endanger languages severely.

You all know something about the destruction of plant and animal species that began with the European colonization. You know that some species, Steller's sea cow and the passenger pigeon for instance, were

exterminated completely, and other species, including the buffalo, the whooping crane, the Port Orford cedar, were very nearly destroyed. And you know that this process has not by any means come to an end in North America or elsewhere in the world.

You also know, I hope, that human beings and human cultures rank right up near the top of this list of threatened beings. Over a space of four centuries, from 1500 to 1900, while the immigrant population was steadily rising, the total indigenous population of North America fell by more than ninety per cent. Given that much death, and the forced dislocation, missionization and cultural transformation that went with it, it's astounding that fully half of all the languages spoken in North America five centuries ago are still alive and spoken today.

When you wipe out a community, a culture, and leave five or ten or twenty speakers of the language, you can claim that the language survives, that it isn't extinct. But what happens is every bit as terrible as when you clearcut a forest and leave a strip of trees along the edge, to hide the clearcut from the highway. It's true in both cases that something will eventually grow back—but what was there before is gone forever.

A language is an organism. A weightless, discontinuous organism that lives in the minds and bodies of those who speak it—or from the language's point of view, in the bodies and minds of those *through whom it is able to speak*. Languages are mortal, like other living things—but in a state of environmental health, when languages die, other languages are growing up to replace them. When you kill a language off and replace it with an import, you kill part of the truth. A language is a means of seeing and understanding the world, a means of talking with the world. Never mind talking *about* the world; that's for dilettantes. A language is a means of talking *with* the world. When you kill a language off—even a language with only a single speaker—you make the entire planet less intelligent, less articulate, less capable—and decidedly less beautiful—than it was.

What is it that people say when they're conversing with the world? They sing songs and tell stories. They make poems, in other words: lyric poems and narrative poems. And wherever there is language, that is what happens. Wherever in nature there are humans, there are human languages, and wherever in nature there are languages, there are stories. If we dress that statement up so it sounds like it belongs in the university, it will say, *Every natural human language has a literature*. But in its own unprinted way, every *non-human* language has a literature too. If something speaks well, literature is what it has to say. (If you prefer a more self-centred definition, we can also put it this way: any well-told story turns to literature when you pay it close attention.)

In Europe, China, and the other regions of the earth where industrial technology has really become a fetish, many people seem to believe that literature is some kind of rare and special achievement, only created by “advanced

civilizations.” Some historians claim that great literatures are only created by great empires. It is true that the resources of empire can do a lot to increase literary *quantity* or literary *storage capacity*, but literary quality is independent of that.

Literature, in fact, is as natural to language as language is to human beings—and for human beings, language is as natural as walking. Language, in fact, is as natural as eating, which all living creatures do. Humans have a proven ability to out-talk and out-eat everything else on the planet, at least in the short term, and some people seem immensely proud of that. Why, I’m not quite sure.

Scripture—that is writing—is a technology, but a fairly simple technology, like fire. Unlike fire, writing in the narrow sense of the word is not a cultural universal. That may be why mythographers (myth-*writers*, as distinguished from myth-*tellers*) usually say it wasn’t stolen from the gods but was given to humans instead.

Any society that wants this technology can obtain it, but like other potent technologies, writing radically alters every society into which it is introduced. To this day there are missionary agencies, both secular and religious, going about the world attempting to spread literacy, claiming that this technology will empower and enfranchise and enrich all those to whom it is given. What these missionary agencies are doing in actual fact is exterminating the earth’s last oral cultures. Those who seek to improve human welfare by exterminating ancient oral cultures are in need of greater wisdom—just like those who seek to improve human welfare by clearcutting the earth’s last virgin forests.

II

People often notice that language helps them think—and then they sometimes ask, *Are there are other ways to think besides in language?* It’s a good question to ask, but that, I think, is not the way to ask it. What the question means is, *Are there languages to think in other than the ones in which we talk?* The answer is, *Of course*. There are the languages of mathematics, the languages of music, languages of colour, shape, and gesture. Language is *what something becomes when you think in it*. Life as we know it thinks, it seems, in nucleic acids. The forest thinks in trees—and all their associated life forms: asters, grasses, mosses, fungi, and the creatures who move through them, from annelids and arthropods to thrushes, jays and deer. Humans often, but not always, think in words and sentences.

“Ideas do not exist apart from language,” according to Marx,¹ and many others say the same. The meaning of this claim is that “the only way to think is in the speech of human beings.” The entire natural world stands as proof that this is false. Yet in a broader sense—a sense that is equally alien to Marxist and to capitalist values—I suspect the statement is true. Where there

are ideas, there is language. Myhtellers however are prone to remember (and writers to forget) that the languages of words are not the only kind of human language, and the languages spoken by humans are only a small subset of language as a whole. Some deeply human stories tell us this is so.

Plato, for good reason, tells his stories through the mouth of a non-writer, Socrates. This is a link to the older tradition of narrative philosophy, now ignored in a lot of the places where philosophy is taught. If you enter into a truly oral culture, you find that almost all philosophical works are narrative. In a world without writing, the primary way—and maybe the only way—of doing sustained and serious philosophy is by telling stories.

The two greatest works of Haida philosophy, for example, are *Xhuuya Qaagaangas* and the *Qquuna Cycle*. These happen to be two of the longest and densest extant works of Haida narrative literature. Both are mythic cycles, dictated in the fall of 1900 by a man named Skaay, who could neither read nor write, but who could think, in narrative terms, with extraordinary clarity, depth, and beauty.

In the hands of an expert myhteller, the stories are a form of wisdom. In the hands of anyone else, they may be nothing more than narrative clichés. Here as elsewhere, everything depends on the tradition—yet everything depends on the individual as well. If you treat the stories with respect, you have to learn to hear them in their language—their tradition—but also in the voices of the real individuals who are telling them. That’s been the foundation of my own approach to Haida oral literature: to translate the works of individuals and give the poets back their names.

All the classical Haida literature we have is oral, and all of it was dictated in the space of a single year to a single man, a linguist named John Swanton. He arrived in the Haida country in September 1900 and stayed for eleven months. During that time, he did essentially nothing except take dictation in Haida. He filled 5,000 pages of notebooks with Haida text and spent the next two years of his life typing the texts he’d transcribed.

The longest of these works, Skaay’s *Qquuna Cycle*, is a poem, an oral narrative poem, about eight hours long. In printed form, that’s about 5,500 lines. It is different in innumerable ways from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but it has that kind of epic reach, and I’ve compared Skaay to Homer many times. This spring, working through the final drafts of my translation of that poem, I started thinking more and more about the ways in which Skaay resembles Dante instead. He probes a long, long way into the psychological depth of his characters, probing the heart, the mind, the world all at once—as if to say that heart, mind, and world are one thing.

Skaay is the greatest of the classical Haida poets whose work survives, and one of the greatest myhtellers I have ever encountered in any language, in any culture. I think that if literature were taught in an honest way in North America—if native cultures were paid the respect they deserve—Skaay would be recognized as one of this continent’s major authors.

It seems to me that a course in literary history should begin with linguistic geography: a close look at the map, and then at the calendar, to see what languages are spoken in what places, and then a closer look to see who speaks them and whose words have been transcribed and when and where and under what conditions. If we taught American and Canadian literature that way, we would be well into the course before we came to the moment in history when Spanish, English, German, Dutch, and French and other colonial languages were imported to North America and the big colonial literatures started to build. Most people teaching literature teach only the top layer and forget to even mention the foundations.

III

There is no boundary, so far as I'm concerned, between linguistics and literary history. Linguistics, in fact, is a branch of natural history—the branch that focuses, let us say, on the statements made by speaking creatures, and on the stories that they tell—in the same way that conchology focuses on the shells made by shell-making creatures, and osteology on the bones made by creatures that have skeletons. This approach frightens many linguists away. Many of them don't know what "literature" is, but they know it sounds awfully subjective and unscientific, so they'd like to think it has nothing to do with their field. And to some scholars of literature, "linguistics" sounds morbidly objective, technical and dry.

I prefer to think about literature as a continuum that includes everything from birdsong to linear algebra and symbolic logic. Most of that continuum, or all of it, is occupied with stories.

So linguistics deals with the stories creatures tell. But what about the stories creatures *are*? Can we do a linguistics of that? I don't see why not. But what kind of linguistics would it be? It would be biology. If that's the case, it means not only that linguistics is a branch of natural history, but that natural history is a branch of linguistics.

Now we're getting somewhere. That is, we're getting to where we are, which is into a net of stories and interconnections from which, even in death, there is no escape. Each of us tells stories, and each of us is a story. Not just each of us humans, but each of us creatures—spruce trees and toads and timber wolves and dog salmon. We all tell stories to ourselves and to each other—within the tribe, within the species, and way beyond its bounds. Roses do this when they flower, finches when they sing, and humans when they speak, walk, sing, dance, swim, play a flute, build a fire, or pull a trigger.

A lot of the messages humans send are audible messages, transmitted by the fancy apparatus of the mouth, received by the even fancier apparatus of the ear. Those are the sorts of messages most linguists choose to study. But at least one Native American language—American Sign Language—is

altogether silent. That exception—and it is not the only exception—proves a very important rule. The words *language* and *linguistics* are made, as you know, from *lingua*, which is the Latin name for the tongue. But language isn't limited to the tongue. People speak with their hands, arms, shoulders, heads, faces as well as their voices. Speakers of American Sign Language speak with these silent organs exclusively. This tells us that the terms *language*, *linguistics*, *syllable*, *phoneme*, *phonetics*, and so on—all those words fixated on sounds and on the tongue—are really metaphors. So is the dichotomy *oral* vs *written*, which invites us all to choose up sides and have a tournament or a war between the People of the Mouth and the People of the Hand. Talking and writing are different, it's true, but those are only two of many ways to speak, and they can enter into many sorts of partnerships and collusions—which, by the way, is what is happening here and now.

Language isn't confined to the system of mouth and ear any more than emotions are restricted to the breast or dancing to the feet. There isn't any one organ or one anatomical process to which language is confined. And if that is true of language, it is true of stories too.

IV

Humans, in any case, send messages. Analytical linguists parse these messages into components—phonemes, morphemes, suffixes, prefixes, infixes, roots, particles, words, phrases, clauses, sentences. A lot of linguists stop there, just at the point where, for me, the study of language gets most interesting.

A story is to the sentence as a tree is to the twig. And a literature is to the story as the forest is to the tree. Language—that metaphor—is the wood the tree is made of, an engineer might say, but a biologist would notice something else. The wood the tree is made of is created by the tree. Stories make the language they are made of. They make it and keep it alive. You can kill the tree and take the wood, kill the story and take the language, kill the earth and take the ore, kill the river and take the water—but if you really want to understand the wood, the water, the ore, you have to encounter them in the trees, the rivers, the earth. And if you really want to understand the language, you have to encounter it in the stories by which it was made.

What's more, if you really want to understand the tree, you have to encounter it in the forest. If you want to understand the river, you have to explore the watershed. If you want to understand the story, you have to go beyond it, into the ecosystem of stories.

If you'll forgive me, I'll make a little detour here into the dreary realm of terminology. I have not lived for the thousand years it would take to become conversant with all five hundred native North American languages, but as far as I've been able to make out, most of these languages distinguish two major kinds of stories: those that occur in mytthtime and those that occur in

human time or historical time. In Cree, for example, the former are called *âtayôhkêwin* and the latter *âcimôwin*. In Haida, the former are *qqaygaang* and the latter *gyaahlghalang*. In Kwakwaka, the former are called *nuyem* and the latter *q'a'yoł*. In Osage, the former are *higo*, the latter *úthage*. These are not the only names for literary genres in any of these languages, but this basic distinction between two kinds of time, and two kinds of story, seems to be important. Like the distinction between oral and written, it's a distinction we should be careful not to get trapped in. The greatest Cree storyteller on record, Kâ-kisikâw-pihtokêw, loved to play around with this pair of terms in Cree, calling the same stories *âtayôhkêwin* at one moment and *âcimôwin* the next—but when his student, the linguist Leonard Bloomfield, tried the same trick, Kâ-kisikâw-pihtokêw corrected him abruptly.

The etymology of these terms naturally differs from one language family to another, but consider the two Cree words for example. The word *âcimôwin*, meaning a story set in human time or historical time, comes from the verb *âcimô-*, which means to tell, to explain, to report, to give an account. The word *âtayôhkêwin*, meaning a myth, a sacred story, a story set in myth-time, is related to—in fact, on the surface, it is identical to—one of the words for spirit being or guardian spirit. Is such a story merely “something told”? Its name appears to mean it lives and breathes.

It's easy to get into trouble translating these terms into English. One reason is that English is a very acquisitive language that keeps putting words in the bank. We have a surplus of terms: *myth*, *story*, *tale*, *legend*, *reminiscence*, *memoir*, *history*, *tradition*, *chronicle*, *epic*, *fiction*, *narrative*, *novel*, *travelogue*, and so on, not to mention compound terms such as *fairy tale*, *true story*, *science fiction*, and the rest. In the real life of language, these terms overlap; in fact, they sprawl all over each other like teenagers lounging around on the couch. A pedant could make them all sit up straight and proper and measure off the space assigned to each, but the moment the pedant left the room, that order would dissolve. And while we have that surplus of words for different kinds of stories, there are some other equally basic terms that we lack.

We have the word *myth*, in any case, and we can use that for any kind of story, any kind of narrative, happening in mythtime. A *mythology*, then, is an ecosystem of myths, a forest of language where those kinds of stories are dominant. What do we call an ecosystem made of the other kind of stories, the ones that are sited in human time? This kind of language forest embraces both history and fiction. The English word *history* had that larger sense once upon a time, but we would have to do some work to get it back. And what about the larger ecosystem, including mythology, history, and fiction? I've been using the word *literature* for that kind of ecosystem, even though I know the term *literature* has been poisoned by academic use. I need a name for the big watershed of stories, human and nonhuman, and that's the most suitable term I have found.

This detour into terminology is all in aid of making a simple point. A story—whether it’s myth or fiction or history—typically has a beginning, a middle and an end. We may not start at the beginning and may never get to the end, but we expect them to exist, like head and foot. This is a sign that stories, like sentences, are individual organisms more than they are communities. An ecosystem is different. A forest has an *edge*, it has a *boundary*, and it may, vaguely speaking, have a *middle*, but it has no beginning and no end, because it isn’t a linear structure. It simply starts wherever you enter it and ends wherever you come out. The same is true of a mythology. History may or may not be linear, like a river, as many people claim. Mythology, like the forest, clearly is not.

V

Trees grow in and on the earth. Where do stories grow? They grow in and on storytelling creatures. Stories are epiphytes: organisms that grow on other organisms, the same way tree-dwelling lichens—*Alectoria*, *Bryoria*, *Letharia*, and so on—grow on trees.

I have a hunch that from a lichen’s point of view, the basic function of a tree is to provide a habitat for lichens. I have a hunch that from a story’s point of view, the function of storytelling creatures—humans for example—is to provide a habitat for stories. I think the stories might be right. That’s what you and I are really *for*: to make it possible for certain kinds of stories to exist.

We don’t know very much, strange to say, about the biology of stories. Aristotle studied their anatomy, but not much more was done, in a scientific way, until the twentieth century, when Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss and then the linguist Dell Hymes—Gary Snyder’s old roommate—started to study their physiology more closely. One of the first things Propp and Hymes discovered is that, whatever the language they’re told in, stories tend to have branching, fractal structures, very much like trees.

Those trees, the trees of meaning we call stories, grow in your brain and the rest of your body. And there seems to be a symbiotic relation between those trees of meaning and ourselves. What the stories get out of it is, they get to exist. What we get out of it is guidance. Stories are the fundamental way in which we understand the world. They are our best maps and models of the world—and we may yet come to learn that the reason for this is that stories are the constituents of the world.

Some of you, maybe all of you, are familiar with a twentieth-century proverb, *The map is not the territory*. We owe this statement to a linguist by the name of Alfred Korzybski. (Semantics, Korzybski’s field, is of course a subdivision of linguistics, though Korzybski did his best to make it sound like something else.)

Thirty years ago, in a lecture in honour of Korzybski, Gregory Bateson proposed an idea that startled and frightened his audience. The idea was simple enough. It was *that the units of biological evolution and the units of mind are one in the same*. This thesis owes something to Darwin, of course, and something to Lamarck—an often vilified biologist for whom Bateson had a refreshing degree of respect. And it owes something to Parmenides, the Presocratic poet who said, among other things, τὴ γὰρ αἰετὴ νοεῖν ἴσθιν τε καὶ εἶναι. This is a short, sweet, simple Greek sentence which no equally simple, sweet, short English sentence really matches. That is, it takes more than one English map to portray this little parcel of Greek territory. Here are two approximate translations: (1) *To be and to think are the same*; (2) *To be and to have meaning are the same*. The implication of the Greek verb νοεῖν is that thought and meaning form a unit which ought not to be dissolved.

Put the Greek philosopher-poet Parmenides and the English biologist Charles Darwin in the same room for a moment and you have the makings of Bateson's thesis, that the units of biological evolution and the units of mind are one in the same. Put Parmenides and the Haida philosopher-poet Skaay together for a moment in the same canoe and you have the implicit beginnings of what I like to call ecological linguistics.

I have a hunch that fields of learning worth their salt grow up from their own subject matter. I don't imagine they can be generated by lightning bolts of theory hurled from above. But lightning storms are welcome now and then, if only for the glory of the show, and Bateson's thesis looks to me like one of the founding principles, one of the illuminating flashes, of what ecological linguistics ought to be.

Bateson was 65 years old when he delivered his Korzybski Lecture, and this was the time of his own awakening. I'd happily quote you the whole lecture, but here two paragraphs will do:

If you put God outside and set him vis-à-vis his creation, and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your folks or conspecifics against the environment of other social units, other races and the brutes and vegetables.

If this is your estimate of your relations to nature *and you have an advanced technology*, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. You will die either of the toxic byproducts of your own hate, or, simply, of overpopulation and overgrazing. (1972, p. 468)

An idea, as Bateson says, is “a difference which makes a difference” (1972, p. 272). A meaningful difference in other words. A thought worth thinking is a meaning. A tree of meaning is a story. A forest of such stories is a mind. So is a tree

with birds in its branches. So is a human with ideas (plural) perching in its brain.

This, now, is a very small tree composed of just such differences: a tree of meaning, a tree of ideas. It is the shortest section—far and away the shortest section: a four-minute section—of Skaay's eight-hour poem, dictated in Skidegate, Haida Gwaay, in October 1900. It concerns the relation between the Sitka spruce, which is *qayt* in Haida, and *Sphyrapicus ruber*, the red-breasted sapsucker, who in Haida is called *stluujagadang*.

*Anang qqaayghudyis haw,
qqan aa qqaayghudaayang wansuuga.
Lla guut lla qaaganggwaangas
Stluujagadang aa.
Ll ttaaghun dlsquxhan llagha gawus.*

*Gyaanhaw unsiiya gu qayt yuuwan qqalgawgyagangas.
Gyagaang lla kkutdlskidas.
Gyaan lla kkuudadighandixhan,
giina ll suudas,
«Dang tsin · gha quunigaay gwahlang dang qaattsixhalga.»*

*Gyaan gii lla qiixhagasi.
Gam giina gut qqaahlghaghangas.
Gyaan ising gangaang giina ll suuwudaghaay dluu
qaydaay naxhul xhiilaayasi gii lla qiixattsiyaay dluu
tajxwaa nang ghaadaghaghaagha sqqin gangaang ghiida qqaawas.*

*Gyaan ll qattsaaayas.
Nang qqayas anggha ghuuda skajiwaay ghii daayaangisi.
Gut ghiista lla lla dangttsisatliihliyaay dluu
ghin ll xiyaay ttaaghun lla ttawustaasi.
Waaaaa.*

*Gyaan ll kkiida ising waaghii lla giijas.
Gyaan lla lla tlghuuhlghadlstlas.
Sagwii lla lla sghiit hltabxiyaangdas.*

*Gyaan han lla lla suudas, < >
«Hay ttakkin · gha hittaghan hl na qayt.
Hawhaw giina gagi diiga daa ijiniittsi.»*

*Gyaan ll qaasuwalasi.
Gyaan ll xidas.
Gyaan tlagu ll waagansas gangaang
qaydaay gii agang lla ttahlghaasgitsi,
gyaan lla kkuudadigangasi.*

Haw tlan ll ghiida.

That is to say,

What's encircled by the tide
was grassy all around, they say.
He was always going back and forth along it –
the Sapsucker was.
He had no feathers whatsoever.

Then, up above, there was a big spruce sloughing off its skin.
He whacked it with his beak.
And as he drummed his beak against it,
something said,
"Your father's father asks you in."

Then he looked for what had spoken.
No one was there.
Then, after something said the same thing again,
when he peeked inside the hollow of the tree,
someone shrunken and sunken, white as a gull, sat at the back.

Then he stepped inside.
The elder lifted the lid from a little round basket.
When he had opened up the five nested one inside another,
he presented him with feathers for his wings.
Ooooooooooh my!

Then he gave him tailfeathers too.
Then he shaped him with his hands.
He colored the upper part of him red.

Then he said to him,
"Now, my little grandson, you should go.
This is why you have been with me."

Then he went back out,
and then he flew,
and then he did the same thing as before.
He clutched the tree,
and then he struck it with his beak.

And so it ends.²

VI

We owe many things to David Abram, and not the least of these is the rallying cry, *The rejuvenation of oral culture is an ecological imperative.*

Why is oral culture a key to our continued coexistence with the world?

Because . . .

Oral culture means much more and less than simply talking. Rekindling oral culture means rejoining the community of speaking beings—sandhill cranes, whitebark pines, coyotes, wood frogs, bees and thunder.

Oral culture also means much more than telling stories. It means learning how to hear them, how to nourish them and how to let them live. It means learning to let stories swim down into yourself, grow large in there and rise back up again. It does not—repeat, does *not*—mean memorizing the lines so you can act the script you’ve written or recite the book you’ve read. Rote memorization and oral culture are two very different things.

If you embody an oral culture, you are a working part of a place, a part of the soil in which stories live their lives. There will in that event be stories you know by heart—but when the stories come out of your mouth, as when the trees come out of the ground, no two performances will ever be the same. Each incarnation of a story is itself. What rests in the myhteller’s heart are the seeds of the tree of meaning. All you can tape or transcribe is a kind of photograph or fossil of the leaves: the frozen forms of spoken words.

To put it in other terms, the text is just the map; the story is the territory. The story however is also a map—a map of the land, a map of the mind, a map of the heart, a map of the language in which the story is told. Every map is also a territory, and every territory a map—*but not its own*.

You find the words by walking through the vision, which may be in the heart that is there inside your body, or it may be in the heart that is out there in the land. You learn the trail if you walk it many times, but every time you walk it, you reinvent the steps. There may, of course, be steep and narrow stretches where you memorize the moves—those places in the story often crystallize as songs—but they are subject, even then, to variation and erosion and other forms of change.

In an oral culture, stories are given voice. They are also given the silence in which to breathe. Very rarely in oral cultures do you meet people who talk *all the time*. In literate societies, I meet them rather often. Here, what’s more, I am in danger of becoming one myself. I therefore beg, at last, to be excused.

Notes

- ¹ This statement occurs, for example, in Marx’s *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1859).
- ² The Qquuna Cycle §2.3. The Haida text (retranscribed from John Swanton’s unpublished Haida manuscript) is reprinted from Robert Bringhurst, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (1999), p. 170–172, and the translation from Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay, *Being in Being*, edited & translated by Robert Bringhurst (2001), p. 148-149. Both

books are published in the USA by the University of Nebraska Press.

Notes on Contributor

Robert Bringhurst is one of Canada's most respected poets and a probing cultural historian. He is also a skilled linguist who has worked for many years with Native American texts and is the author of *Story as Sharp as a Knife*, Volume 1 of the trilogy: *Masterworks of the Classical Haida*. Of the two subsequent volumes to the trilogy, *Nine visits to the Mythworld*, by Ghandl, and *Being in Being*, *The Collected Works by Skaay*, Robert is translator.

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