Where There Are Always Wild Strawberries

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"Where there are always wild strawberries" is a personal reflection on what revitalizing our Halq'emeylem language can mean in the context of a Stó:lõ person's life and illustrates how our language, identity, and place are inextricably interconnected, reflecting an important aspect of Stó:lõ world view. The presentation draws on the author's personal life experiences using narrative style and metaphor traditional stories of the Stó:lõ people to illustrate Stó:lõ conceptual systems. "Where there are always wild strawberries" was presented as a keynote talk at the conference, The revitalization of Aboriginal societies: Land, language, philosophy, arts on July 9, 2000.

O Chíchelh Siyám, Plíst te Sq'éptset
O Chíchelh Siyám, Ch'ithómetset lám kw'e Méw'stam
Éykws sté'as.

O Creator, Bless this gathering
O Creator, we thank you for everything.
Amen.

Éy Siyá:m si: yáye
Greetings my dear friends. Welcome. Welcome to our Coast Salish Territory, to a land where there are "always wild strawberries."

This story is about my own personal journey to my homeland, to this place "where there are always wild strawberries." I think I've always been in this place, though far away for a really long time. It's been a journey of blacks, whites, and grays, not quite being able to see and experience the wonderful juicy, tasty redness of the berries. I've been looking for these berries all my life. And now, I feel like they are just about within reach. I can see them, almost feel them, and even almost taste them.

My story is a story about our Halq'eméylem language and is told in the context of this Stó:lõ person's life experience. My story aims to get at what it means in the life of one Stó:lõ person to participate in the revival of a nearly extinct Aboriginal language.

I am learning that it is the responsibility of each and every one of us who is concerned about our Aboriginal language to explore the deepest recesses of our soul to know what it means for us personally to be committed to the renewal effort. In my explorations, I look back in time to my childhood, to my family, to my Stó:lõ roots, to my Stó:lõ country, to S'ólh Téméxw, to a place where there are always wild strawberries.

My burning question throughout my life has always been "What happened to us? Why are we in the state we are in? What happened to our

language, our culture, our traditions?" Burning, burning through my heart, my soul, my being. Ultimately, my question has been "Who am I?" Who can tell me who I am? How can I know who I am? In Stó:lõ social structure there were three distinct groupings: (a) smelá:lh, "worthy people" defined as those who know their history; (b) s'téxem, "worthless people" defined as those have forgotten their history; and (c) skw'iyéth, or slaves. I came to discover that I have been s'téxem, a "worthless person," one who doesn't know her history, and that this state of affairs was a deliberate government effort to eradicate any trace of my identity as a Stó:lõ person.

"What are you doing?" my older sister said to me one day when I was about six years old. "I am washing my hands," I said. "But you have been washing and washing and washing," she said, "why are you doing that?" "Because I want them to be nice and white like my mother's," I said. Well, my mother's hands were not white at all, but they sure were not as brown as my dark little suntanned hands. How soon we learned that "White is right."

"Sauvage! Sauvage!" came the words in a tone that meant the caller was aiming to hurt. My siblings and I and my Mom were taken to a faraway land, far away from the salmon, far from the familiar lakes and streams to a foreign place. The place was cold; the language was French. We lived in Sept-Iles, Quebec for most of my growing-up years. My siblings and I often talked about the fond memories we cherished of our "home by the Fraser."

Please sing "My Home by the Fraser," I would ask my Mom, and she would humor me. And the song raised images I remembered of Hope, BC, of the mountains and lakes and rivers, of the wild flowers, berries, salmon, and oolichans. We were called the "half-breeds who lived down the hill." We lived on the margins of the small town in a house my father built himself. Even today some people remember the little slope at the end of Wallace Street as Gardner's Hill. I didn't feel s'téxem then. Wild strawberries tasted sweet, nameless, in the innocence of childhood.

The word *Stó:lõ* was never spoken in our home when I was growing up. My parents were not ashamed of it in any way; they simply did not know the term. Nor was it ever understood that our Stó:lõ language was called Halq'emeylem. At home my Dad felt free to banter with my Mom in the few phrases of Halq'emeylem that he knew. Mom never spoke it, but understood what my Dad was saying. Sometimes he would call us "r-e-eal Xwélmexws," and told us that it meant we were "re-e-al Indians." I guessed that being "re-e-al Indian" was different from being just Indian. On a very private level I knew that he meant we should be proud to be Xwélmexw, but that in public we should know that to be Indian was to be disdained. At home I felt proud and distinct to be Xwélmexw, to be real.

Throughout my adult life I wanted to know everything about this place where there are always wild strawberries. There I could become smelá:lh, a worthy person who knows her history. "The key to this knowledge is in the language," the Elders would say, "in the stories, and in the land." And what might that mean, I wondered.

I once tried to learn Halq'emeylem by listening to audiotapes of word lists, which featured a linguist who would say the words in English, and then an Elder would translate the words into Halq'emeylem: not a good way to learn a language. But it gave me exposure to how the language sounded, so the exercise was not completely useless. A text accompanied the tapes, and I could see how the language looked in writing.

Then I would hear and read that the Elders said, "The language is central to our identity ... the land is the culture ... and our world view is embedded in our language." These ideas were challenging for me to understand, not having had much direct exposure to our language, our culture, or what was meant by our "world view." What were these? How can I know these? I wanted to know.

Finally, I was brought to my homeland to a class where my Halq'eméylem language was taught. It was taught by a linguist and Stó:lõ Elders, with 20 or so Stó:lõ students in a class in a portable at Stó:lõ Nation grounds in Sardis, BC. Suddenly I saw myself reflected in this group in a way I had never experienced before. My classmates knew who I was by my relations. I felt at home with them, with their humor, their movements, their rhythms. But more important, I was inspired by what they were doing; they were learning the language so that they could become teachers of the language. All but one was female. Hmmm, wonder what that means? In any case, this class inspired me to write about them, to write about what they were doing. Because the questions about world view seemed a little daunting to me, I thought a more doable project might be to document what it meant in the context of the lives of these individuals to revive our language. I can almost smell the sweet aroma of the strawberries now.

"Our language connects us to our land," my classmate says to me. "If you want to examine the meaning of something, you should look at the term S'ólh Téméxw." As she wrote the Halq'eméylem words on a piece of paper, she explained that the term "S'ólh" means "Our, Respectful," or "Sacred " and that "Téméxw" means "Country, Land," or "World." "Us, the People, are included in our term for the Land," she says, "and this links us to all of our ancestors. See the 'mexw' in Téméxw? That part of the word refers to us, the People, like in Xwélmexw, the word for First Nations, the word we use for ourselves."[1] And then, later, it was brought to my attention that the word for belly button was mexweya. Wow! I thought, it's all there, the land, the language, all and us deeply interconnected.

Little did I know when I began to learn about S'ólh Téméxw how deeply embedded it is in who we are as Stó:lõ people. This brief conversation with my Stó:lõ classmate began my odyssey toward exploring the idea of meaning, of how we make meaning of Our World, of S'ólh Téméxw. I am discovering that S'ólh Téméxw is not just words, is not simply a representation of the physicality of the World. S'ólh Téméxw is a representation of a holistic concept that links the people spiritually to the physical world, to each other, and to all our ancestors and is expressed best through our Halq'eméylem language. These interrelationships define our culture, define who we are as Stó:lõ people, and in fact define our world view.

S'ólh Téméxw refers to *our relationship with* the land, a relationship that has been evolving for at least 10,000 years. The relationships in Our World, which I use to refer to the world in Stó:lõ terms or Indigenous terms, are defined in the language itself, in the words of the *sx̱wõx̱wiyám* and *sqwélqwel,* our ancient stories of creation and our oral history, or true stories, respectively. Our stories show how the land, the language, and we are linked together. The Katzie, a Downriver Halkomelem-speaking people, believed that animals and plants, and perhaps even rocks, possessed power and *smestí:yexw,* a word that means *vitality* and *thought* combined, for there was no conception of one without the other. The water, wind, the sun, the moon and the stars also possessed power, vitality, and thought, and people could *share* in these powers of nature. Diamond Jenness (1955), in *Faith of a Coast Salish Indian,* states the following about this phenomenon,

> Every living creature in man's neighborhood emanates power, which travels about and frequently attaches itself to the vitality of a human being. The power of an individual wolf, for example, may enter a man, making him a good hunter; the man gains, and the wolf itself loses nothing. Each creature has its special power that it can bestow, and some tiny outwardly insignificant creature may bestow stronger power than the bear or whale. (pp. 36-37)

And thus the relationships in Our World are bound together by *smestí:yexw,* bound by the power of our shared vitality and thought, or will. The Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en,[2] Indigenous peoples in northern British Columbia, hold a similar world view.

> This Western world view sees the essential and primary interactions as being those between human beings. To the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, human beings are part of an interacting continuum, which *includes animals* and *spirits* [my emphasis]. Animals and fish are viewed as members of societies, which have intelligence and power, and can influence the course of events in terms of their interrelationship with human beings. (Gisday Wa, p. 23)

The Indigenous paradigm, or world view, is encompassed in creation stories, myths, and legends involving a trickster, or transformer. For the Gitksan, it is We-Gyet whose "blunders, tricks and falsehoods changed the face of the earth, and the shapes of many of earth's creatures. He was a

creator—by accident! Caught between spirit and flesh—no man, yet all men" (Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art, Bookbuilders of KSAN (1977). For the Stó:lõ, it was X̲á:ls or X̲ex̲á:ls the Transformer(s), who came through the world, transforming monsters and other myth-age beings into rocks and animals, and *setting things right* in S'ólh Téméxw (Carlson, 1998, p. 185).

A brief comparison of Xwélmexw and Xwelítem (or Western) world views will illustrate how our world views affect how we live. For Xwélmexw, or mythic people[3] (Martin, 1987), all of life's teachings were revealed at the time of creation, and through this "sacred history," or *sx̲wõx̲wiyám* the events of creation are relived and reenacted over and over through story and ceremony. The time of creation is ever present in the now and in the future, making it impossible that a "historical consciousness" would develop. Mythic, or Xwélmexw, people are people of biological orientation who follow Nature's grand symphony of endlessly repeating cycles of birth, growth, senescence, and death, followed by rebirth. And these rhythmic cycles have the same behavior, form, and power as at Creation.

Time in Xwelítem, or Western, history is linear, placed on a continuum where one is separated from the past in a millisecond, and uncertain of what the future will bring, thus the need to ever be progressing in the development of new technologies for human survival. Western myth is narcissistic, with all of its great literature heroic, its philosophy humanistic, and its image God-like. People of history are people of anthropological orientation.

And now, how do land, language, and world view interconnect in Xwélmexw thinking? The following stories illustrate some of these connections.

Always Wild Strawberries

Cheam is an Indian Reserve in Stó:lõ traditional territory; its Halq'eméylem name is *Chiyó:m* and translates as "always wild strawberries." Wild strawberries grow plentiful on a mountain that is said to have taken its name Cheam Peak from the same meaning of the Pilalt village of Cheam. Now, the Tait people, in whose territory the peak stands, consider it to be like one of them; for according to legends, the mountain is heard to moan in sorrow when any member of the tribe dies—even in a distant place. But for the Tait the mountain is known as Theethul-kay, or *Lhílheqi*, "the mother mountain." The word literally means "joined together" and refers to three "sons," the three peaks attached to her to the east. The mother mountain also had three daughters, the youngest of which she is said to hold in her arms. There are legends also concerning the ancestors of the people of Popkum, who came down from Theethul-kay, or *Lhílheqi* (Wells, Maud, & Galloway, 1987, p. 17). Every time a different person tells

the delightful story of Cheam, new information is revealed be shown in the following rendition.

In this next account of the *Legend of Mt. Cheam,* the story is expanded to include relationships with neighboring mountains, and the introduction of a dog, which can be seen in the mountains from a certain vantage point. This mountain family story is related by Stó:lõ Elder Mrs. Amy Cooper, and is intermediated by Mr. Oliver Wells.

Legend of Mt. Cheam

Mrs. Cooper: Well, Mount Cheam is a lady, and Mount Baker is a man. (This is an old legend). So Mount Baker, he comes over and he looks for a wife, and he finds a nice-looking girl. So he takes her over to the State of Washington. They live there and they have three boys, Mount Hood, Mount Rainier - I can't tell you what the other one is. And they have three girls, but the boys are the oldest ones. After the boys grew up and she had three little girls, she says, " I had better go back home, " she says, "to my people, to the Fraser River." So she comes back, and she says: "I'll stand guard," she says, "I'll stand and guard the Fraser River, that no harm comes to my people, and no harm comes to the fish that comes up to feed them."

Wells: Well that's very interesting.

Mrs. Cooper: That's the legend. And then she takes her three children, and she stands up there. And coming down from up the road, there's three little points, and those three little points are her children. They say she holds the smallest one in her hand. And behind her, towards this way, is the dog head of the dog that followed her, and she told the dog to go back home, and it stood there, and stayed there. So I guess right now there, if the snow isn't all off, you could see that dog head plain. Did you ever see it?

Wells: Yeah. Some people call that the creeping prospector.

Mrs. Cooper: No, it's really honestly a dog head there. (Wells et al., 1987, p. 51)

And now, are we ready for a delectable serving of the sweet-tasting, juicy berries from my homeland? It is that our *smestíyexw,* our thought and vitality combined, that generates our imaginative capacity[4] (Lakoff, 1987) as Stó:lõ people to attribute our humanity to the mountains and to draw on the *smestíyexw* of the mountains, on its thought and vitality combined, for our protection and comfort. *Smestíyexw* is the interconnecting force of life and power of will prevalent in our shared environment and is a fundamental concept of our Stó:lõ world view. Can you taste the strawberries yet?

Notes

[1]On March 6, 1998, my classmate Tl'owkomot (Verley Ned) in Halq'eméylem linguistics approached me with her idea about S'ólh Téméxw. I decided to make a point to explore this topic in planning my doctoral program.

[2]Gisday Wa and Delgam Uukw (1989). In a Supreme Court statement in British Columbia over their land claim, they felt it necessary to supply evidence of the framework, or world view, within which their claim was being made.

[3]In the Epilogue "Time and the American Indian" Martin (1987) differentiates people with world views based on trickster type, or creation stories, and those with a strong Judaeo-Christian imprint. The difference, he notes, is that the former feel themselves

connected with the Cosmos and cosmic rhythms, and the latter with history. Martin named the differentiation as people of myth and people of history, or people of biological orientation and people of anthropological orientation (pp. 194-199).
[4]Lakoff (1987) is of the experientialist view that "Thought is embodied, that is, the structures used to put together our conceptual systems grow out of bodily experience and make sense in terms of it; moreover, the core of our conceptual systems is directly grounded in perception, body movement, and experience of physical and social behavior." He states that "every time we categorize something in a way that does not mirror nature, we are using general human imaginative capacities," and that "Human reason ... grows out of the nature of the organism and all that contributes to its individual and collective experience: its genetic inheritance, the nature of the environment it lives in, the way it functions in that environment, the nature of its social functioning, and the like (p. xv).

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