

The Nlha7káp̓mx Oral Tradition of the Three Bears: Interpretations Old And New

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First Nations oral traditions have been subjected to European interpretations for centuries. The early interpretations rarely considered the opinions and views of the Nations themselves and concluded that the purpose of the oral traditions was to explain the physical world through a primitive "protoscience." This article examines how the Nlha7káp̓mx oral tradition of the Three Bears was similarly interpreted. However, it also offers a Nlha7káp̓mx interpretation of the oral tradition that is more instructive. This oral tradition is not simply etiological, but is an important link to the rich spiritual life of the Nation and to traditional rituals and ceremonies. The interpretation of oral traditions is vital not only to the recovery of the cultural heritage of the Nlha7káp̓mx, but also of their identity. The rediscovery and reinterpretation of oral traditions is also important for education and a return to traditional customs.

Like other First Nations of North America, the Nlha7káp̓mx Nation of British Columbia has a rich oral tradition.¹ This tradition still lives among its people, but has been little understood and interpreted for the greater world. In this tradition one story stands out, that of *Skwíkwł'kwetl't* and his two other brothers, or "the Three Bears," who passed through the world of the Nlha7káp̓mx bringing about great changes and making known its mysteries. This tradition is significant not only because of its prominence in the collections of non-First Nation anthropologists and scholars, but, more important, because of its place in the community of the Nlha7káp̓mx today: to this day the Elders of the Nlha7káp̓mx still tell the stories of *Skwíkwł'kwetl't*. The purpose of this article is to explore this story from the perspective of the Nlha7káp̓mx themselves and from that of non-First Nations scholars. In this twofold undertaking I hope to provide dual perspectives on what is an essential part of this Nation's life and spirit.

This work is part of the reclamation by the Nlha7káp̓mx Nation of their traditional heritage and is important for a number of reasons. First, it involves defining the Nation's identity according to Nlha7káp̓mx values. Formerly non-First Nations people decided how and with what methods the oral traditions were examined. By so doing they characterized the Nation itself. Works written on the Nlha7káp̓mx, as is true with many other First Nations, are a reflection of Eurocentric world views and attitudes, and not of the Nation itself. Such unilateral interpretation is part of the colonialism and paternalism that has characterized European relations to First Nations. But such a reevaluation of our cultural heritage is not simply a matter of academic interpretation. The oral traditions, like the

teaching of the language, are an important tool for the reestablishment of traditional ways. The oral traditions are and always have been a vital means of education, especially for the young (Beck & Waters, 1988). They express our ways of thinking and approach to our land and world. Like our Elders, they are a repository and touchstone of all that we are as a Nation and people. They must be freed from their European bonds and returned to the community. Like the teaching of the Nlha7kápmx language, they will help the young return to the ways of the land and spirit.²

The impetus for such an undertaking is provided today by the work of members of the Nlha7kápmx community. Thanks to ongoing projects that are restoring traditions to the Nlha7kápmx by way of language and recollection of the oral traditions, there are many more sources available for an investigation of the Nlha7kápmx and their world view. In particular I referred to a work by Hanna and Elder Mamie Henry (1995). Hanna and Henry worked with community storytellers to collect a number of oral traditions throughout Nlha7kápmx territory. *Our Tellings* is one of the most significant contributions in terms of the written word to Nlha7kápmx heritage in the last 50 years. It is a testament to the living—not simply surviving—spirit of our Nation. These traditions are generally divided into two categories by the Nlha7kápmx: those that took place in the time of creation, known as the *sptakwelh*, and those that took place after this time in what we might refer to as historical time, namely, the *spilaxem*.³

The oral tradition discussed in this article belongs for the most part to the former category, the *sptakwelh*.⁴ It takes place in the time of creation and deals with the adventures and transformations of *Skwíkwíł'kwetl't* and his two brothers. The first recorded version of this tradition is found in the work of Charles Hill-Tout (Maud, 1978); other versions are found in Teit (1898, 1900, 1912, 1916, 1917, 1918), Boas (1916), and most recently in *Our Tellings* (Hanna & Henry, 1995).

Versions of the Three Bears' Oral Tradition

Traditional European approaches to myth and oral traditions require collecting and comparing all existing versions of the story and isolating those parts and features that support particular arguments and theories. Issues typically considered are the origin of the myth, its original form, how it evolved over time, and how each Nation modified it according to its own customs and beliefs. Although I refer to all recorded versions, I do not analyze these versions of the Three Bears tradition in order to answer such questions. I am not trying to discover what, for example, is the most authentic and true account. Because the oral tradition of the Three Bears is still being told by Nlha7kápmx Elders today, and therefore is still living and changing, there is no essential version and no inferior, less important version. Rather, each version as a unique, indivisible entity reflects the interests and associations of their telling. It is a credit to Hanna and Henry that they reproduced different accounts of this tradition, without attempts

at comparison and reductionism. As Deloria (1978) has noted, this reflects an essential difference between European and First Nations world views. Western scientific and philological methods involve the isolation of elements in anything examined in an attempt to control and manipulate what is studied and therefore reality itself. Although great technological advances have resulted, life has been stripped away from reality. The First Nations approach, on the other hand, is significantly different: "Instead of isolating things, Indians encompass them; togetherness, synthesis, and relatedness characterized their experiences of the universe" (p. 140). This relatedness also reflects the role of oral traditions in First Nations culture. First Nations are not so much concerned with the question *why*, but with *how*; not why a thing came about, but how that thing or event relates to us today and helps define and help us (Beck & Waters, 1988). This in turn defines our responsibility to the world and as is not the case with European scientific method, how we can control the world, but what we must do to ensure the harmony of the world.

I have chosen the 1899 version recorded by Charles Hill-Tout of Chief Mischelle as a foundation to which I refer other versions mainly told by Elders.⁵ It is by far the longest version of the Three Bears oral tradition, but as stated above, equally important are those of later tellers such as Hilda Austin, Mary Williams, and Anthony Joe (Hanna & Henry, 1995). However, in terms of an outline it is convenient to refer to other versions using Chief Mischelle's version as a guide. Teit (1898, 1912) and Boas (1916) also recorded oral traditions about the Three Bears.⁶ Elder Annie York (York, Daly, & Arnett, 1993) referred to several sections of the Three Bears story in her explanation of Stein Valley rock paintings (the following numbers indicate story sections discussed below: 1-5, 10, 15, and 20). In *Our Tellings* (Hanna & Henry, 1995), Hilda Austin tells a story including sections numbered 1-11, 20, and 14; Mary Williams tells another story including sections numbered 1-11 and 17; Anthony Joe refers to sections 20 and 14; Louie Phillips mentions section 20; and Mandy Brown discusses section 8. Herb Manuel and Louie Phillips add to our knowledge of *Skwkwatl'kwetl't* with two additional tellings.

Chief Mischelle was one of Hill-Tout's chief informants in his work on Nlha7káp̓mx oral tradition and culture (Maud, 1982). The oral tradition of "Sqaktktquac̓t or the Benign-face" was "not as complete as the old Indians used to relate it; he [Mischelle] had forgotten the latter portions of it. It was originally so long that those listening to it invariably went to sleep before it was concluded." In the Nlha7káp̓mx version, Hill-Tout cooperated with Mischelle on the transmission, editing, and final version. As Maud said, it is a credit to Hill-Tout that he was so concerned about the accuracy of his version with respect to the teller Chief Mischelle.

This oral tradition is extremely complex and defies simple summarization. Although I believe such summarization is contrary to the spirit of Chief Mischelle's telling, it is necessary to do so in order to give context to

those unfamiliar with it. I outline the story in two ways. First, I give an abbreviated version of the story, and then I list its various sections (numbered 1-26).⁸

The story takes place in "mythological times" when the world was still being changed and set right by various powers such as the Transformers.⁹ Although the Old Man and Coyote are familiar as beings that roamed the world making changes, particular to the Nlha7kápmx were the Three Bears, the youngest of whom was *Skwkwatl'kwetl't*.¹⁰ Chief Mischelle relates their many adventures in the territory of the Nlha7kápmx and other Nations, even Europe. The story begins with a story of familial jealousy.¹¹ Woodpecker had two wives, Grizzly Bear Woman and Black Bear Woman. Woodpecker favored the latter, and in jealousy Grizzly Bear Woman plotted and murdered not only Woodpecker, but also Black Bear Woman. She also intended to kill the three¹² children of Black Bear Woman, but was unsuccessful. Her plans backfired and instead her own children were drowned by the Black Bear Woman's children, who then fled. Mistaking the bodies of her own children for those of the Black Bear cubs, Grizzly Bear Woman ate her own children. A pursuit followed, and after nearly being cornered by Grizzly Bear Woman, it was Groundhog¹³ who aided the Black Bear Woman's children. He helped them cross the river,¹⁴ but when Grizzly Bear Woman also wanted to cross, he had her killed by the River Fish by a means of a trick.

Free from the threat of the Grizzly Bear Woman, the Three Bear Brothers now traveled through Nlha7kápmx territory ridding it of evil beings and making a number of changes. Soon enough, it was the youngest brother, *Skwkwatl'kwetl't*, who proved that he had the most power. He killed an elk by transforming himself into a hummingbird and then passing clean through the elk, flooded the entire land when his brothers abandoned him. He also invented a number of devices to help the early people (a deer sinew for childbirth, and the creation of women). The Brothers later met and outwitted Coyote, two witches who had dammed the river (and thus allowed salmon finally to travel up the Thompson), and two wizards who had been plaguing travelers. They then traveled through the Nicola and Thompson valleys and toward Harrison Lake, transforming a number of wicked people who lived in those areas. The last portion of Mischelle's story tells of *Skwkwatl'kwetl't*'s journey to "the white man's country," where he invented for them the plough, wagon, and gunpowder.

Hill-Tout tells us that Mischelle's version is not even complete and that the latter parts have been forgotten. Thus some might argue that the Three Bears oral tradition consisted of a unity now lost and that it cannot be understood now because of its fragmentary state. However, the tradition is flexible and, as shown by its retelling by contemporary Elders, still told and significant in independent portions. The following is a numbered list of the various sections or parts of Chief Mischelle's version.

Introduction

1. the Grizzly Bear Woman's jealousy;
2. the murder of her husband Woodpecker;
3. the murder of the Black Bear Woman;
4. the trick of the soup and the drowning of the Grizzly Bear Brothers;
5. the cannibalism of the Grizzly Bear Woman.

The Flight

6. the flight of the three Black Bear Brothers;
7. the tree climbing and the use of wasps, ants, and wood dust;
8. the delay of the Groundhog;
9. the crossing of the river;
10. the Groundhog as ferryman;
11. the killing of the Grizzly Bear Woman by the River Fish.

The Transformations and inventions of Skwkwatl'kwetl't

12. the transformation into a hummingbird and the killing of the elk;
13. the Beaver tail supper and the draining of the lake;
14. the abandoning of Skwkwatl'kwetl't and the flood throughout the land;
15. the invention of the neck sinew cord for easing childbirth.

Confrontations with evil powers

16. the humiliation of Coyote and his transformation into an animal;
17. the two witches and the salmon; the breaking of the wicker dam across the Thompson; the use of flies, wasps, mosquitoes, wind, and smoke.

Creation traditions

18. the man and his piece of wood;
19. the creation of women from the cotton wood tree and the alder wood tree.

Further Confrontations

20. the cannibal wizard and his fishing spear; the transformation into a trout at Zexzéx;
21. the transformation of the wizard into a blue jay and his wife into a mountain grouse.

Adventures beyond the Thompson-Fraser Valleys

22. the adventures in the Nicola Valley the transformation of a Nicola valley people into stones;
23. the adventures in the village of the Dog-people in the Thompson valley and their transformation into ants;
24. the adventures at Harrison Lake and the transformation of the wizard into a seal;

25. the adventures at Lillooet and the creation of collection place for salmon.

Future Prophecy: Journey to the White Man's land

26. the invention of the plough, wagon and gunpowder.

In Chief Mischelle's telling of the Three Bears' adventures, all periods of Nlha7kápmx tradition and history are represented: from creation and the time of the Transformers to an anticipation of the coming of the Europeans. It describes how the Three Bears escaped their wicked step-mother, traveled through Nlha7kápmx territory, and transformed creatures and beings into animals and rock formations, invented various objects, created women, punished certain villages, and then predicted the coming of Europeans. From the mythological era to the present, the youngest of the Three Bears, *Skwíkwí'tl'kwetl't*, plays the most prominent role. This oral tradition is not only extremely complicated, but at first sight confusing. How has it been interpreted, and what is its meaning?

European Interpretations

Traditional European researchers apply a number of methodological approaches to myth.¹⁵ The scientific study of myth began with an examination of traditions from Greco-Roman antiquity. This mythic tradition is extremely complex and is represented by a host of authors from the epic poetry of Homer (c. 750 BCE); Europe's first poet; the plays of the Athenian tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (5th century BCE); Hellenistic poets such as Apollonius Rhodius (3rd century BCE); to writers of the Roman period, where Greek traditions were redefined and reinterpreted, such as Vergil (70-19 BCE) and Ovid (43 BCE-17 CE). The myths of this tradition were studied in classical antiquity and again from the European Renaissance onward (Seznec, 1972). In the 19th century, when classical studies became a "science," the scholars of myth adopted scientific methods. Scientific analysis concluded that the myths acted as a kind of primitive or "protoscience," explaining the reasons behind natural phenomena at a time when rational, scientific method had not yet evolved.¹⁶ Finally, in the 20th century, methodologies developed based on newly discovered oral traditions in Southeast Asia and South America.¹⁷

These different approaches have two things in common. All have been applied to the oral traditions of First Nations, and all have been applied without reference to what the Nations themselves thought about their own oral traditions.¹⁸ They have also affected how the oral traditions of the First Nations of British Columbia have been recorded. This is evident in the collections recording the oral tradition of the Three Bears made by Hill-Tout, Teit, and Boas (Maud, 1982).

The earliest written version of the Three Bears story, as stated above, is that of Charles Hill-Tout, who recorded and transcribed the story of the Nlha7kápmx Chief Mischelle in the late 1890s. As discussed by Maud

(1978), the title given to this story reflects the scholarly preoccupations of Hill-Tout and his need to justify the study of this oral tradition and to give it academic validity. This is seen in his attempts at comparing the Three Bears tradition with a myth of the ancient Sumerians.

The works of Teit and Boas not only reflected an interest in comparative mythology, but also the 19th century European preoccupation with the nature theory of myth (Kirk, 1978). Teit (1898) said of the Nlha7kápmx oral traditions that he collected: "The contents of mythology prove clearly that attempts at the explanation of nature are the primary source of myth" (p. 18). Boas' (1916) *Tsimshian Mythology* focuses more on comparative mythology and the desire to associate and relate all the oral traditions of the First Nations of British Columbia. Although many of his observations are valid to this day, in his zeal to find the essence of these oral traditions in his terms alone, he loses sight of their uniqueness and their role in particular Nations.¹⁹ Finally, as Maud (1982) has pointed out, both Teit and Boas thought of oral tradition aetiologically, which reflected European work on myth, and particularly that of Andrew Lang.²⁰

The aetiological school of thought, promoted by Andrew Lang in the early part of the 20th century, held that the purpose of myth the world over was to give the causes and explanation of physical reality (Kirk, 1978). Ironically, this approach to myth is no better than the school that Lang attempted to refute, as developed by Max Müller who argued that myth was nothing more than a protoscience that attempted to explain natural phenomena (Kirk, 1978). Thus if we recount the oral tradition of the Three Bears and how they moved up and down the Thompson and Fraser Rivers as they transformed certain wrongdoers into various features of the landscape, the Nlha7kápmx who passed by these features would explain these topographical and geological irregularities by telling the story. Nothing could be more simplistic and more in line with the European viewpoint of First Nations oral traditions and culture. It accords well with European notions of the "primitive" mind and its limited protoscience. As well, *Skwíkwatl'kwetl't* as a European type "culture hero" is responsible for certain cultural innovations. This can be seen in the breaking down of the dam, permitting the salmon to go northward into the Upper Thompson River. *Skwíkwatl'kwetl't* also invents the salmon bowl and various other artifacts critical to Nlha7kápmx survival.

This practice among European scholars and anthropologists of defining and interpreting First Nations oral traditions continues today. The structuralist school of C. Levi-Strauss is founded not on European sources such as that of Greece and Rome, but on the oral traditions of the Indigenous peoples of South America. It has been in turn applied to Chinook oral traditions by Hymes (1981).²¹ All these studies have one thing in common, the lack of participation of the communities involved. The methods are external to the Nations and speak for them. Said (1979), in his landmark work on colonialism *Orientalism*, has shown how politically

subordinate cultures can be vulnerable generation after generation “to the modish as well as seriously influential currents of thought in the West” (p. 43).

What is remarkable about the work of these European scholars is their lack of interest or reference to the ideas of the Nations themselves about their own traditions. This, however, is not altogether their own fault. It is quite clear that the First Nations communities themselves were unwilling to pass on to outsiders information and understanding of the oral traditions. Thus the European anthropologist and scholar, unable to penetrate the world of the First Nation person, turned back to his own traditions to study these traditions.

First Nations Interpretations

Recent work conducted by a number of British Columbia First Nations scholars has now opened a door to this world. In particular, I mention Lorna Williams (1997) of the St’at’yemc Nation and Shirley Sterling (1997) of the Nlha7kápmx Nation, whose work has shown the personal impact and importance of oral traditions in the education of First Nations people. Williams has combined the oral traditions of her community with multimedia and film as teaching tools and has written several works on educational methods based on St’at’yemc perspectives. Sterling’s (1997) approach is equally important:

The grandmother stories explore the meaningfulness of two Nlakapamux oral traditions, *spetalkl* (creation stories) and *spilaxem* (personal narratives), which are both study subject and study method and the methodology, which drives the research. Each of a series of linked critical essays begins with a grandmother story and then provides an analysis of what the story explicates in terms of personal meaningfulness and contemporary educational theory and practise. The purpose is to examine how oral traditions have survived among the Nlakapamux of the Interior Salish of British Columbia and through transmission provide pedagogies, philosophies, histories and healing. Oral traditions are one of the most lasting methods of Nlakapamux education, and they can inform educators and restore cultural relevance to what and how we teach Nlakapamux children and other learners in the classroom today. (p. ii)

The reflections and words of Elder Annie York have given particular insight into the relation of some oral traditions to the life and world view of the Nlha7kápmx. European examination of the oral tradition of the Three Bears concluded that the purpose of these stories was to explain only the nature of the physical world through a kind of simplistic, primitive, and childish protoscience. It is true that one aspect of the traditions can be called aetiological. But this would not explain the persistence of the stories among the Nlha7kápmx today. Clearly, one must look closer and attempt to discern other aspects of the oral traditions that reflect the concerns and interests of the Nation itself, not those of Europeans. One such concern is the spiritual life of the Nlha7kápmx and how this life is connected closely to the land and its powers—powers established in mythological times and recalled by the telling of the *sptakwelh*. These oral

traditions remind us that we have a connection and responsibility to our land, and that to this day the mysteries of this earlier era still reside in the Thompson and Fraser and have vital impact on Nlha7kápmx life.

The spiritual world is essential to Nlha7kápmx reality and to many First Nations. This world view is described by Teit (1900), but it is the words of Elder Annie York that give the vision context and life. Described ignorantly by anthropologists as "animism," the world, land, birds, animals, even the rocks have spirit and sentience; everything is alive.²² In the pursuit of survival and life, the Nations must appeal to and cooperate with this living world and all its parts for help. This means of communication is gained by traditional education. At the core of Nlha7kápmx education are the rituals and ceremonies whereby one came into contact with this non-human world. The young, both boys and girls, at a certain time, went out alone into the wilderness to exercise, take sweat baths, fast, sing and pray. In particular locations known to the community the young might encounter powers called *sn'am*²³ or "guardian spirits" to help and guide them through life. The *sn'am* came to one in dreams or while awake in the form of birds, animals, and even figures from the mythological era (Johnson, in press). These protecting spirits not only gave them guidance in life, but also helped them perform those tasks to which they were suited for the benefit of the community: hunter, basket-maker, fisherman, root-digger, warrior, healer, and so forth.²⁴ These spirits or powers were encountered at specific places in the Nlha7kápmx territory, and the oral traditions were part of the Nlha7kápmx knowledge of these powers. The Stein Valley in particular is associated with the places that these powers inhabit, but they also dwell throughout Nlha7kápmx territory. Nlha7kápmx youth and shamans visited Mt. K'ek'awzik, on the eastern edge of the Stein.²⁵ The oral traditions explain how powers came to reside in certain locales. In mythological times Beaver unleashed a great flood that drowned "the many bad shamans who continually wrought evil" (Teit, 1912, pp. 278-279, 332-333). As the floodwaters receded, the bodies of these shamans and other "ancients gifted in magic" were either left to rot into the earth, or they drifted into lakes and creeks where they disappeared. Their spirits were said to have taken up residence in the places where their bodies dissolved (York et al., 1993).

Not all the powers came to be where they were as a result of Beaver's flood. In a version of the Three Bears story recorded by Teit (1912), *Skwkwatl'kwetl't* "transformed the cannibal into the 'mystery' of that place and made a dam across the creek at Zuxt" (p. 317). The Transformers, then, also played a role in assigning powers to places by their actions, and *Skwkwatl'kwetl't* and his brothers in particular. All versions of the Three Bears' oral tradition, recorded and contemporary, stress both time and place.²⁶ This emphasis shows that they were not myth or "unreal" in any sense, but the events described actually took place and still influence the

life of the Nation. Particular parts of the *Skwikwtl'kwetl't* story show the following geographical emphasis.

Locales of specific events in the Three Bears' oral tradition

1. the Grizzly Bear Mother's jealousy (Petani Valley);²⁷
8. the delay of the Groundhog (*Ngwuyuyumxw* [Lot 47 up Botanie Road], Hanna & Henry, 1995);
17. the two witches and the salmon; the breaking of the wicker dam across the Thompson ("A few miles above Spences Bridge") (Maud, 1978);
21. the transformation of the wizard into a blue jay and his wife into a mountain grouse (*Zexzéx*);²⁸
22. the adventures in the Nicola valley the transformation of a village there into stones;²⁹
24. the adventures at Harrison Lake and the transformation of the wizard into a seal (Maud, 1978);
25. the adventures at Lillooet and the creation of collection place for salmon ("On Bridge River") (Maud).

Although it is difficult to pinpoint many of the other locales mentioned, of the list above one place stands out: the story of the mudslide near Spences Bridge (no. 21). Here *Skwikwtl'kwetl't* encountered a one-legged wizard or monster³⁰ that murdered and ate all who passed by (Maud, 1978; Hanna & Henry, 1995). In his attempts to destroy this wizard *Skwikwtl'kwetl't* caused a rock or mudslide to kill him, but this did not work. But eventually *Skwikwtl'kwetl't* triumphed, and the wizard and his wife were later transformed into the blue jay and mountain grouse.³¹

This small part of the *Skwikwtl'kwetl't* story not only refers to a simple aetiological explanation for physical geography, but also, more important, to the ancient powers that once resided there and still have a presence among the *Nlha7kápmx*. The actions of *Skwikwtl'kwetl't* made the place sacred. The telling of this tradition and of others would educate the young about their territory and where the powers of the land might be approached. When it came time to seek out the guardian spirits essential to the life of the community, the youth would travel to these places and recall what had happened there. The power of the place, through the gaining of guardian spirits and experiencing their presence, was shared with the person undergoing their spiritual encounters. This knowledge and experience connected the present with the past, and human beings with the greater spiritual world around them.³² This sharing implies a deep responsibility that the Nation had to its territory and powers in turn. Only if the land and its power were respected would the guardian spirits continue to aid and help the community and its members. In this sense power is never personal, but wholly derived from the land. We are dependent on the land, and cannot control it, contrary to European notions of exploitation. The knowledge passed down through this oral tradition also reminds and

reinforces what the Nlha7kápmx know innately about our world and our places and duty in it.

Conclusion

Although more work is needed, it is clear that the oral traditions represent much more than the European methodologies can explain. The *sptakwelh* describe real events, albeit terrifying and mysterious, but events that took place, not folktales or fairytales, in never-never land, once upon a time.³³ Because European methodologies discussed in this article are scientific and positivistic by nature, and do not take into account the attitudes of First Nations peoples themselves, they cannot come close to understanding the real meaning oral traditions, and in particular those of the Transformers.³⁴ One aspect has always been denied: the importance of the land and territory to its people. The land is its people, and the power of the people lies in the land. The Nlha7kápmx knew this for untold ages, and by relearning and reliving the oral traditions, the young now can hope to regain the power and strength that the land and its mysteries offer. It is the hope that continued examination by the communities of their oral traditions will not only result in the reclamation of their identity, but also a return to the traditions of the people. Once again, the young will see their land, experience its powers, and balance will return to the Nlha7kápmx world. Finally, having recovered our own perspectives, we in turn can help the Old World unravel many of its incomprehensible enigmas.³⁵

Notes

¹Nlha7kápmx territory is centered in Lytton, BC and extends north to Ashcroft, west through the Stein Valley up to Lillooet, south to Spuzzum, and east to Merritt, BC. Their neighbors are the Secwepemc, Stl'atl'imx, Sto:lo, and Okanagan Nations.

²There has been a great deal of inspiring and stimulating work on how First Nations peoples are working to throw off the effects of centuries of colonial and cultural domination. In particular, in terms of academic approaches, see Mihesuah (1998). The essays contained in this work discuss many of the problems facing First Nations scholars in their attempts to reclaim tradition and identity. They represent the approaches and attitudes of their individual Nations, and sometimes there is little consensus, reflecting the tension between "Tribalism" and "Pan-Indianess."

³This division in itself is significant because it reflects the Nation's own idea of categories and not European divisions such as divided the traditions geographically, that is, from the upper or lower tribal divisions.

⁴Although we speak of the oral traditions themselves in these categories, many of the traditions cannot be divided in such a convenient fashion. The traditions, as seen below, reflect a continuity between the time of the Transformers and our own time, and the relationship between ourselves and the powerful beings of earlier time, still present in our world.

⁵Originally published by Hill-Tout, Charles as "Sqaktktquact, or the Benign-faced, The Oannes of the Ntlakapamuq [Thompson], British Columbia," *Folk-lore*, 10 (June 1899), 195-216, and reprinted in Maud (1978).

⁶Teit, 1898, pp. 42-45 includes story sections referred to later and numbered 12, 20, 14, 18, 19; pp. 69-71 also includes story sections 1-11; Teit's later 1912 work, pp. 218-224, includes sections 1-11, 14, 15, 18, 19, 23; pp. 315-319 includes sections 20, 14, 18, 19, 6, 8, 15.

⁷There are several spellings of the youngest of the Three Bears name: *Sqaktkquaclt* by Hill-Tout; Teit (1898) refers to all Three Bears as the *Qoa'qlqal* and *Qwa'tqwaLt* or *Qwa'qtqwaL*. Teit (1912) later adds: "Some say that thenceforth [after the death of the Grizzly Bear mother] they were generally called *Qwa'tqwaLt*" that is, after they became transformers. They are also called *Qwo'qtqwal*. Elder Annie York uses the name *Xwekt'xwektl* (York, Daly, & Arnett, 1993), and refers to the Three Bears collectively as "*Mbetchichiit*" ("little bears" p. 100). Annie York also helps to explain the name "Benign-face," because *Skwkwotl'kwetl't* is sometimes called "Smiley" as well (p. 123). *Skwkwotl'kwetl't* is used by Hilda Austin (Hanna & Henry, 1995). I use this last version as the most recent. Among the Sto:lo, the name *Xa:ls* or *Xaxá:ls* is used (York et al., 1993).

⁸The problems inherent in summarization are obvious. Like non-First Nations' scholars before me, I am reducing a living story into smaller, more "manageable" portions. I recommend reading the various versions of the tradition as the only way of truly understanding it. The interpretation that follows is only one of many, not the only or even the best.

⁹The beings in the earlier age were not as fixed in appearance as they are now. Many of the figures in this oral tradition, as is true of other First Nations' stories, had not only the form of characteristics of animals, but also were seen as human beings and as a combination of the two. The Transformers themselves fixed the final form of animals, human beings, plants and rocks that we know today.

¹⁰The Maidu Nation of northern California tells a story strikingly similar to that of the Three Bears. In their version, however, the Three Bear Brothers are replaced by Two Deer Sisters (Beck & Waters, 1988).

¹¹The start of the story is located in the Petani Valley, north of Lytton.

¹²Four Bears in Hilda Austin's version (Hanna & Henry, 1995).

¹³Their grandfather *Skwani7kwa* in Hilda Austin's version (Hanna & Henry, 1995).

¹⁴This river, Thompson or Fraser, is not stated explicitly anywhere; however, it must be the Fraser as in Mary Williams' version (Hanna & Henry, 1995) the Black Bear Brothers, after their escape from the Grizzly Bear Woman, "were wandering throughout the country, all the way down to Lytton, then up towards the Stein" (p. 73). This orients their movements at this point along the Fraser. After meeting the witches at Lytton, they then moved up the Thompson, where they defeated the wizard at Zexzéx (Mudslide), about four miles below Spences Bridge.

¹⁵The clearest historical survey and discussion of the methodologies of myth is provided by Kirk (1978), who identifies five "monolithic" theories. His study is critical of the limitations of each of these approaches in terms of understanding all myths from all cultures.

¹⁶This approach dominated the approach of Teit and others, see below, that is, the chief function of oral traditions being only the explanation in a "primitive" way of causes behind and origins of natural phenomena and human institutions.

¹⁷In particular, see the work of Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss (Kirk, 1978). Deloria (1995) sums up these approaches:

People such as Claude Lévi-Strauss in our time have constructed incredibly complex intellectual edifices in an effort to explain the complexity of the tribal knowledge and at the same time keep it embedded in the stereotypical status of primitive speculations. And most of the Lévi-Strauss theory of so-called primitive mentality is simply French intellectual nonsense. Those people certainly would have been savage if they had been forced to think using the processes Lévi-Strauss describes. (p. 48)

¹⁸For other examples of this type of cultural imperialism, see Miller (1998).

¹⁹See Maud (1982) on the absurdity of some of Boas' attempts to localize oral traditions in his efforts to illustrate his theory of dispersion of myths and to prove the connection between the people of the New World and Asia.

²⁰Maud's (1982) comments about Teit and Boas are most instructive. In particular, see a wonderful discussion of the Nlha7kápmx oral tradition "The Mosquito and the Thunder"

(p. 69) and how European interpretation can distort transmission of oral tradition. However, Boas showed unequivocally the ties between the Interior and Coast Nations of BC. The Three Bears story and other oral traditions of the Nlha7káp̓mx have obvious connections with stories of the Kwakiutl (Maud, 1982) and the Tsimshian.

²¹For a critical look at Hymes, see Maud (1982).

²²See Beck and Waters (1988) on the “unseen powers” (pp. 9-11).

²³See Teit (1918), Johnston (1995), and Beck and Waters (1988). The word *xá'xa* (power, mystery) is closely associated with the *sn'am*. This is the Nlha7káp̓mx word for the powers and mysteries that dwell in the waters and land of our territory; Teit (1912) in a note on this word, stated: “A spirit which works harm, and is feared by the Indians” (p. 317).

²⁴Particular spirits were associated with particular roles (Teit, 1900).

²⁵Of Mt. K'ek'awzik, Elder Louis Phillips said:

K'ek'awzik is over here, across the river, behind these hills. Can't see it from here. Powerful place. It's our school. Today the kids drop out of school. They learn from books. In our day we learned by listening to the land. The land talks if you know how to listen. K'ek'awzik is where you graduate from. You know, the Bible says Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights without food. That's why the Indians go for that Bible. It's the same thing with us. Our young people were sent up there to K'ek'awzik for ten days. No food no water. If they stuck it out, they come out, graduated. The mountain, that place talks to them, Some it doesn't talk to. (York et al., 1993, p. xvi)

²⁶The time is the “remote past” (Maud, 1978, p. 21).

²⁷Also called “Botanie valley” (Hanna & Henry, 1995, p. 71).

²⁸See Teit (1898) about the place *Zixazi'x*: “The name of a place about four miles below Spences Bridge, on the south side of The Thompson River, where there is a sliding mountain called Mud-slide by the whites. *Zixazi'x* means ‘slides’” (pp. 42-45); Maud (1978) notes “a mud-slide on the Thompson River, about five or six miles below Spences Bridge” (p. 35); and Hanna and Henry (1995) also refer to “the slide area at Spences Bridge” (p. 74). They locate the exact position on their map: *Zexzéz* = Mudslide (p. 4).

²⁹“Little rocks on a mountainside, “which may be seen from the wagon road as one passes today” (Maud, 1978, p. 36).

³⁰Called “*Tcu'isqa'lemux*” by Teit (1898, p. 42).

³¹Or, according to the tradition recorded by Teit (1898), into stones.

³²For the connection between the land and First Nation peoples, see Deloria (1991).

³³That the oral traditions are not myths in the European sense, but describe real events is the focus of Deloria (1995).

³⁴Mircea Eliade argued that the purpose of myths was “to evoke, or actually recreate to reestablish in some sense, the creative era” (Kirk, 1978, p. 63). Of all European approaches, this approach comes closest to help understanding Nlha7káp̓mx oral traditions. However, it should be emphasized that the powers still exist in the land. Eliade's approach is nostalgic and a pursuit of a lost time and world. The land and spirits of the Nlha7káp̓mx are still here, unchanged and whole.

³⁵That the New World and its perspectives are essential to the survival and health of the entire planet is commonly known through the great interest in First Nations concepts of ecology and the environment. But as the work of Deloria (1979) suggests, our perspectives on reality and the world offer solutions to many of the issues that have faced the Old World for millennia.

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