

DO GLACIERS REALLY LISTEN?

A review essay

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Do Glaciers Listen?

Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination

Julie Cruikshank

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JULIE CRUIKSHANK is a student of stories told particularly by Native women in northern Canada. Her storytellers seek to instruct, and Julie Cruikshank is a listener. In listening, she enters a world where the categories and boundaries of modern Western thought are absent; where the apparently inanimate are altogether animate; and where people, animals, and land interact in complex, changing local places. The world of such stories is grist for her reflection, less about the past, which ostensibly the stories address, than about the present. She thinks that modern Western life has moved too far from its oral roots and from local places. It has allowed a preoccupation with the universal to override the local and, in so doing, has lost touch with a crucial source of wisdom. It is this source that she would recuperate, and she does so by immersing herself in stories that, from a modern Western vantage point, are voices from elsewhere.

In *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination*, Cruikshank takes on stories about glaciers in the St. Elias Mountains at the junction of Alaska, Yukon, and the northwestern corner

of British Columbia. This is a region of huge glaciers – the largest alpine glaciers in the world; of rapid glacial advance through the little ice age (c. 1550–1850 AD); of spectacular glacial surges; and, overall in the twentieth century, of considerable glacial retreat. Native people have engaged with this active and frequently violent landscape for thousands of years, and Europeans for a little more than 200. Glaciers in Native stories are sentient beings. They listen, and if they do not like what they hear – being made fun of, for example – they are wont to surge. They smell, and find the odour of cooking grease particularly offensive. They have the power to dam rivers, obliterate villages, and kill many people. Travellers move warily around, over, and occasionally under them; sometimes their passage is blocked, sometimes the glaciers become corridors between coast and interior. Always, in Native accounts, people and glaciers are beings mixed up with each other. Europeans, on the other hand, placed the two in separate categories. French Enlightenment science, in the form of an expedition commanded by Jean-François de La Pérouse, arrived at Lituya Bay

on the Alaskan coast in July 1786. The French set up an observatory, measured, conducted a reconnaissance of the bay (looking for a northwest passage), and lost twenty-one men in riptides at the bay mouth. Lituya Bay was a disaster, and La Pérouse took stock accordingly. The landscape was “frightful” and its inhabitants differed “as widely from civilized nations as the land I have described from our cultivated plains” (139). Rousseau, he concluded, was wrong about savages. Almost a hundred years later, John Muir, an emerging icon of American environmentalism, arrived at Glacier Bay in search of the particularly accentuated wilderness experience he associated with glacial purity. His ecstatic rambles left his Native guides shaking their heads and occasionally elicited sharp reprimands: “Hereafter, let me manage this canoe. Don’t act like a fool any more” (172). An extraordinary young Englishman, Edward Glave, who had lived along the Congo for several years and was something of an artist, writer, and linguist, made a long overland expedition in 1890 (sponsored by an American weekly newspaper) north of Lynn Canal to the Tatshenshini River, which his party descended. Unlike Muir, Glave was interested in Native people. He sketched them, learned a smattering of Tlingit, saw frequent signs of Native land use, and urged the retention of Native place names. Back the following year, he had reverted to the common discourse of civilization and savagery, perhaps, Cruikshank speculates, because he had come to equate Native people with Arab slave traders raiding into the Congo. Later yet, when the border between Canada and Alaska was finally agreed upon, there were accounts by surveyors who, like La Pérouse, came to locate and measure.

Cruikshank explores these European accounts partly because she is interested in their intersections with Native stories. The fate, for example, of La Pérouse’s men in the riptide at the mouth of Lituya Bay followed by only a few weeks the loss there of several large Tlingit canoes and their occupants. For a few days, apparently, there was some convergence of grief. Europeans wrote of glaciers that growled and crawled, but these were metaphors, as the sentient glaciers in Native stories were not. Overall, the European accounts are used as foils for the Native stories – as reflections of two radically different ways of constructing the world.

This is a beautifully written and thoughtful book, a pleasure to read. Focused on a small area while drawing on a complex, interdisciplinary literature, it offers a grounded yet connected account of a sort that postcolonial scholarship often advocates and rarely achieves. But is it as important as Julie Cruikshank avers to pay close attention to Native stories, and, if so, why? What, really, is to be learned?

Cruikshank’s Native storytellers never told her precisely why they told the stories they did. For them it was obvious, but others are left to infer. The glaciers in the St. Elias range have been in various wilderness parks for many years and are now part of a world heritage site. Hunting is not allowed and, as a result, young Native people do not know the land in question. Perhaps these stories were told to acquaint them with, as it were, their geographical heritage and with elements of their history. Perhaps they were told to unsettle the assumptions that separated people and land and led to the creation of exclusionary wilderness tracts. They may have been intended to strengthen land claims. It is also possible, as Cruikshank notes, that stories about

the destructive power of glaciers are allegorical accounts of the coming of epidemic diseases and European colonialism. In some of the stories, the glaciers give off intense heat from which people try to save themselves by immersion in water. This seems to suggest smallpox. However, whether or not stories were told and appreciated by Native audiences for any or all of these reasons is, in a sense, beside the point. Cruikshank is writing primarily for Westernized moderns, and her claim about the importance of Native stories is intended for such people.

Basically, I think, she feels that stories are important because they place nature and culture within a common social field – one that emphasizes interrelationships, dependencies, and, as she puts it, the “connections between activities on the land and proper social comportment” (258–9). Especially in our abstracting, normalizing, and compartmentalizing modern culture, she considers this a lesson to be learned. Properly understood, she thinks it would deter us from reconfiguring age-old social space into wilderness areas, or from transforming deeply contextual Native understandings into data – traditional environmental knowledge (ТЭК) – amenable to rational land-use planning. Much more than this, she thinks the stories lead towards orality, the local, serious listening, and the respectful intimacies of people and place. Essentially, she presents an anthropological form of an anarchist vision with deep and abiding roots in Western thought. In our contrary age, this vision seems particularly delicate and precious.

In the moral lifeworld of Native stories, glaciers are sentient beings. If that assumption is removed, do the moral lessons still apply? On the other hand, perhaps the assumption has not been

removed? Cruikshank claims that two different systems of local knowledge, one European the other Native, met among the St. Elias Mountains. Others making such claims usually infer that different systems of local knowledge, each of them a cultural product, are equally valid. Cruikshank herself points out that the Enlightenment understandings that accompanied La Pérouse to Lituya Bay were recent and of specific European origin; in this sense, they were local. This seems too facile. Behind La Pérouse and the Enlightenment was a tradition of European thought stretching back to the Greeks, and ahead was an increasingly global system of thought. If two local systems of knowledge met among the St. Elias Mountains, it has, at least, to be conceded that they functioned at different scales. And what of their respective explanatory powers? The title of Cruikshank’s book asks a question that deserves an answer: do glaciers listen? The answer to this question affects, it seems to me, the way we listen to Native stories and what we can draw from them.

I asked a colleague, an expert on snow, why glaciers surged, and he spoke of ground water, friction, and the laws of physics. Is it possible, I asked, that they surge because they don’t like being spoken about or because they don’t like the smell of grease? He looked at me blankly, slowly shook his head, and retreated into his office. Cruikshank cites Bruno Latour’s arguments in *We Have Never Been Modern* about the cultural situation of science and the inseparability of culture and nature. Latour himself now wonders (*Critical Inquiry*, Winter 2004) whether he has opened the door to claims that one explanation is as good as another (to opportunities, for example, for American creationists).

He suggests that there are huge risks if science is knocked off its pedestal, and he appreciates the particular robustness (not the truth) of scientific explanation. Ian Hacking, eminent Canadian philosopher of science, would (as I read him) agree with this. Can we avoid the conclusion, in short, that my colleague offers a more robust explanation for glacial surges than do Tlingit and Tutchone storytellers? I doubt we can. My colleague, of course, is a descendant of the Enlightenment and of La Pérouse. La Pérouse did not think glaciers listen, and nor, except as figures of speech, do we.

How does this bear on our engagement with Native stories? At the very least, it would seem to create complications. The stories present a deeply attractive morality situated in lifeworlds that were built around understandings that, for the most part, are no longer credible. In those lifeworlds, explanations of what we would call physical phenomena were grounded in the local interaction of sentient beings. As moderns, we come at these stories differently. The taken-for-granted background of the stories is not ours; we have, it must be admitted, a great deal of La Pérouse in us. Most of us are not physicists, but we acknowledge that physics has something to say about the movement of glaciers. Physics is not local; its basic understandings, such as they are, are placeless. Similar scientific

understandings and their normative corollaries are at the heart, worldwide, of the assault on the local. In short, we bring to Native stories a great deal of cultural baggage that denies some of the most basic premises of the Native lifeworld, has contributed to the attrition of locality, and has decontextualized Native morality. All of this, it seems to me, makes Native stories exceedingly hard to read and their morality hard to grasp.

The problem goes well beyond Native stories – consider, for example, arguments surrounding the Garden of Eden and the creationists – but, because of their very otherness, Native stories present it particularly clearly. And the problem, which is essentially that we are cut off from the sources of morality, is as basic as any in the modern world. This is why it is so important that Julie Cruikshank and others, students of Native stories, keep us in touch with a mode of being in the world that has served humankind for thousands of years and lingers around the edges of modern life. I am sure she is right that there is much to learn from Native storytellers, and sure too that much of what they would tell us is barely accessible for reasons that are not superficial. My only request of Julie Cruikshank, wonderful scholar that she is, is that she address this problem of communication more squarely than she has.