

Textual Ethnography: The Art of Listening to Texts

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ABSTRACT: In this autoethnographic essay, I reflect on my efforts to move beyond the conceptual and aesthetic horizons of my cultural background via the analysis of texts produced within foreign cultures. I examine several relevant interpretive strategies, stressing the distinction between projective and reconstructive modes of exegesis. I then discuss the challenges that are involved in gaining an appreciation for the aesthetic and emotional qualities of foreign texts without misreading them in the hermeneutic framework of one's own culture.

KEYWORDS: text, exegesis, cultural projection, cultural reconstruction, empathy, Northwest Coast, Bible.

What excites me most as a student of anthropology is the opportunity to explore cultural difference in its various forms. Difference is what enables me to move beyond what I know, to ask new questions and to receive answers that I could never have predicted. As a Westerner who lives in a globalizing world, I constantly encounter familiar values, familiar beliefs, and familiar aesthetics. The fact that the world speaks to me in my own terms is, I recognize, a significant (and inequitable) source of privilege in many regards. Still, there is great value and importance in attempting to understand other cultures in *their* terms. This is a challenge that I must seek deliberately, and I do so using a set of approaches that I call "textual ethnography."

Textual ethnography, as I aim to practice it, is an attempt to achieve inter-cultural understanding via careful and devoted *listening*. I use the terms "textual" and "listening" quite broadly. By "listening," I refer

to a wide range of activities, which include sitting and hearing a narrative unfold from the mouth of a storyteller; reading an old book written by an author whom one will never have the chance to meet; watching a newly released film or television show; etc. The form of listening that I am describing is not defined by an aural medium, but by the listener's humility and willingness to be taught by someone else without trying to alter or add to his or her teaching. A "text," for the purposes of this discussion, is any relatively fixed unit of human expression that can be meticulously examined and reexamined. In a two-sided conversation, the interlocutors constantly adjust to one another's expectations and levels of understanding. Therefore, one of the advantages of studying fairly stable, pre-packaged units of expression is that doing so allows me to "listen" to people as they say things that I may not want to hear or that I may struggle to comprehend, without having them censor or trans-

late their thoughts for my sake.¹ My task as a textual ethnographer is to comprehend what is being said as deeply and accurately as possible.

The method of approaching cultures *through* texts is closely related to the method of approaching cultures *as* texts. The latter approach has been developed in depth by Clifford Geertz, who has described “The culture of a people” as “an ensemble of texts” (Geertz 1973:452). In Geertzian theory, the texts or “symbols” that constitute a culture are regarded as the essential tools with which “the members of a society communicate their worldview, value-orientations, ethos, and all the rest to one another, to future generations – and to anthropologists” (Ortner 1984:129). The task of the ethnographer, then, is to translate these frames of meaning across the communicative gaps that separate different cultures. Geertz makes clear the epistemological limits of his culture-as-text methodology. The textual analysis of culture, he suggests, does not allow the ethnographer to “perceive what his informants perceive” on an experiential level. Instead, it provides the anthropologist with an opportunity to discern the cultural concepts that “they [the ‘informants’] perceive ‘with,’” or, in other words, it is a way of “searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms . . . in terms of which, in each place, people actually represent themselves to themselves and to one another” (Geertz 1975:48). Geertz warns that ethnographers’ attempts to achieve genuine “empathy” with their consultants often devolve into the transposition of consultants’ thoughts to “the framework” of the ethnographers’ cultural categories (Geertz 1975:48). For Geertz, then, the forms of inter-cultural understanding that ethnography can help generate are cognitive and intellectual, not emotional or experiential.

Paul Stoller, by contrast, suggests that it is possible to achieve far more visceral understandings of foreign cultures and their texts.² In an autoethnographic study, Stoller (2004) alternates between

describing his training in the art of Songhay sorcery while conducting ethnographic research in Niger, and narrating his later experiences as a cancer patient. He recalls how his knowledge of sorcery affected how he coped with his illness, as well as how his illness prompted him to embrace Songhay sorcery more fully. For example, moments before receiving his first dose of chemotherapy, Stoller felt a sense of shock when he realized how “disruptive” his course of treatment would be. Then, however, he heard the voice of his Songhay teacher and felt fortified by it (Stoller 2004:78-79). He immediately performed a Songhay ritual involving recitation of the *genji how*, “an incantation that harmonizes the forces of the bush,” whose state of disarray is associated with illness (Stoller 2004:80). During the years between Stoller’s training in Niger and his initial diagnosis as a cancer patient, he had often practiced Songhay rituals, including the recitation of the *genji how*, but in that period of time, the incantation had gradually “become a sequence of words” devoid of meaning for him (Stoller 2004:95-97). By contrast, Stoller recalls that when he faced cancer,

the words of the *genji how* surged like a current into my consciousness. They had become central weapons in my fight against lymphoma. I finally realized that I had misunderstood the deep meaning of the incantation. It was a sorcerous weapon that could divert death. It was a sequence of words that could reestablish harmony in chaotic circumstances. What I hadn’t realized was that the power of the incantation – not to forget the wisdom of Songhay sorcery – comes from the combination of two components: disharmony and peace. By creating harmonious peace in the infusion room, the *genji how* primed me to confront the devastation of disaster. [Stoller 2004:97]

Here, Stoller suggests that his hermeneutic revelation regarding a foreign text was inextricably linked to his personal experiences. Only when he felt “primed” by the *genji how* “to confront the devastation of disaster” did he truly understand (or believe he understood) “the deep meaning of the incantation.” Stoller’s approach, in this regard, differs markedly from Geertz’s methodology. Rather than conducting a

1 Below, I will discuss a case in which someone told me a narrative and subsequently explained it to me. This qualifies as textual ethnography, because although I did ultimately hear the narrator’s “translation” of the tale, I first heard the story in a foreign form that was difficult for me to understand.

2 The dichotomy I have established between cognitive and experiential modes of inter-cultural understanding and my approach to this dichotomy are influenced by what I learned from an undergraduate ethnographic methods course entitled Folklore and Mythology 97: Fieldwork and Ethnography in Folklore, taught by Professor Deborah Foster, during the spring of 2012.

strictly intellectual, cognitive analysis of the concepts underlying Songhay sorcery, Stoller claims to have gained a visceral, experiential understanding of the *genji how* by applying it to his own struggles in life.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both Stoller's and Geertz's approaches. Geertz's method is limited to producing accurate analytic statements regarding the systems of meaning through which cultures operate. It does not offer the opportunity to experience what it feels like to be a member of a different culture. Yet, by relinquishing the pursuit of "empathy" (Geertz 1975:48), this approach minimizes the risk of misunderstanding a foreign culture by unwittingly projecting onto it elements of one's own culture. Stoller's method offers to fill in the experiential gaps left by Geertzian analysis, but it does so at the expense of precision. Geertz clearly identifies what he seeks to discover, namely other people's understandings of their own culture. By contrast, although Stoller captures an understanding of Songhay sorcery and the *genji how*, he does not indicate precisely whose understanding this is. When Stoller describes his exegetical revelation regarding the *genji how*, we are left wondering whether he has *discovered* a previously existing Songhay interpretation of the text, or whether he has *created* his own, novel interpretation. Because Stoller's approach does not clearly distinguish between these different exegetical modes, it does not maximize texts' capacity to shed light on foreign cultures in their own terms, and it must be exercised with caution.

Nevertheless, when analyzing the texts of a foreign culture through a Geertzian lens,³ it is often valuable to borrow a key element of Stoller's methodology: using one's own experiential capacities as testing grounds for the experiential properties of texts. Texts are meant to evoke feelings and aesthetic effects, and as Geertz himself admits (1975), his ethnographic approach does not involve experiencing such effects firsthand. As I indicated in the previous paragraph, I do not favour the wholesale adoption of the hermeneutic methods Stoller uses

to understand Songhay incantations. But when one operates within cautious, culturally appropriate hermeneutic boundaries that have been articulated via the form of analysis Geertz advocates, there are times when it makes sense to apply one's experiential intuitions to the interpretation of foreign texts. It is possible to alternate between intellectual precision and experiential depth in one's understanding of textual material, allowing these two hermeneutic goals to complement one another (cf. Geertz 1975:52-53).⁴ Both of these interpretive perspectives are valuable, just as an artist's colourful drawing of how an ancient building may once have looked is valuable alongside an archaeologist's high-precision sketch of the withering remains of the building's foundations.

In this paper, I will reflect on some of the ways in which I approach foreign texts. I will begin by discussing Genesis 22, the well-known Biblical narrative in which Abraham nearly sacrifices his son, Isaac. Although this text's ideological underpinnings and aesthetic style are, in large part, foreign to me, other aspects of the narrative help bridge this cultural gap. It is therefore possible for me to absorb some of the emotional impact of the story on a visceral, intuitive level without projecting meanings from my own culture that would have seemed alien to the text's ancient Israelite authors. I will subsequently examine texts from the late antique Near East and from the Northwest Coast of North America that are more difficult for me to understand. This discussion will shed light on some of the challenges involved in striking an appropriate balance (cf. Geertz 1975:48)⁵ between an interpretive approach that is designed to maximize intellectual accuracy and an approach that allows for more experiential depth in reading, or "listening to," texts produced within other cultures.

4 This notion of successive alternation between two different methodological or interpretive paradigms is borrowed directly from Geertz (1975:52-53). See footnote 12 for a more detailed discussion of the close relationship between the method I propose and the method Geertz describes.

5 The notion of "balance" that I describe is based directly on Geertz's (1975:48) discussion of establishing the proper combination of or middle ground between "experience-near" and "experience-distant" understandings of culture "in anthropological analysis."

3 Here, I do not mean taking a generally Geertzian, textual approach to culture as a whole. Instead, I mean taking a Geertzian approach to specific texts (e.g. songs, narratives, films, etc.) produced by a foreign culture.

Sympathy From Across the Divide

In Genesis 22, foreign ideological and aesthetic elements occur alongside depictions of emotional experiences with which I can genuinely sympathize. As a result, when I read this text, it viscerally affects me, much as the *genji how* affects Stoller. I believe that my emotional appreciation for the text corresponds in certain ways to the emotional impact it was meant to have on its early Israelite audiences. The experience of reading Genesis 22, in other words, offers me a taste of the ethnographic “empathy” that Geertz (1975:48) describes as elusive. Below, I have provided my own literal translation of the Hebrew text of Genesis 22:1-13:

And it was after these things, and God tested Abraham, and he said to him, “Abraham,” and he said, “I am here.” And he said, “Take your son, your only one, whom you have loved, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and raise him up there as a rising⁶ [i.e. a burnt offering] on one of the mountains that I will tell to you.” And Abraham awoke in the morning, and he packed his donkey, and he took his two youths [i.e. servants] with him, as well as Isaac his son, and he took the wood of the rising [i.e. the firewood for the sacrifice], and he arose and went to the place that God told him. On the third day, Abraham lifted his eyes, and he saw the place from afar. And Abraham said to his youths, “Sit here with the donkey, and I and the youth [i.e. Isaac] will go to there, and we will bow [i.e. worship God] and return to you.” And Abraham took the wood of the rising, and he placed it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife, and they went, the two of them, together. And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and he said, “My father,” and he said, “I am here, my son,” and he said, “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the rising?” And Abraham said, “God will see for himself the sheep for the rising, my son,” and they went, the two of them, together. And they came to the place that God told him, and Abraham built the altar there, and he laid out the wood, and he bound Isaac his son, and he placed him on the altar above the wood. And Abraham sent his hand, and

he took the knife to slaughter his son. And an angel of God called to him from the heavens, and he said, “Abraham, Abraham,” and he said, “I am here.” And he said, “Do not send your hand to the youth, and do not do anything to him, for now I know that you are fearful of God, and you have not held back your son, your only one, from me.” And Abraham lifted his eyes, and he saw, and behold, a ram after it had gotten stuck in the bush by its horns, and Abraham went and took the ram, and he raised it for a rising in place of his son.

Many aspects of this text are alien to me as a 21st-century Western reader. On an aesthetic level, the narrative’s consistent avoidance of visual description (Auerbach 1953:9) seems strange owing to my familiarity with visually detailed novels and films. Even stranger is the fact that the text never explicitly describes Abraham and Isaac’s emotional experiences (Auerbach 1953:11).⁷ However, the widest cultural gulf separating me from the text is not stylistic, but ideological. God tests Abraham by ordering him to kill his son, and Abraham passes the test when he proves his willingness to follow God’s command. Genesis 22 gives voice to a hierarchy of values in which willingness to obey God trumps compassion, the protection of human life, and a father’s duty to love and protect his child. This ethical system differs starkly from the ideological sensibilities of the largely secular, 21st-century Western culture in which I was brought up.

On an intellectual level, I am fascinated by the foreign qualities of Genesis 22. I am particularly intrigued by the absence in the text of any explicit descriptions of Abraham and Isaac’s emotions (Auerbach 1953:11). I am curious what this might tell us about aspects of the ancient Israelites’ worldview, such as their constructions of selfhood and individuality (Auerbach 1953:11-13). I am also interested in how this particular stylistic feature of Genesis 22 parallels other narrative traditions from around the world, including indigenous oral-literary texts from the Northwest Coast of North America (see, e.g., Ramsey 1977:9). When I read this short Biblical narrative, I am exposed to the concepts that the ancient

6 See the entry listed under *’olal/’ola* in Koehler and Baumgartner 2000.

7 My observations on the style of Genesis 22 are influenced throughout by Auerbach (1953) and Alter (2011).

Israelites used to “perceive ‘with’” (Geertz 1975:48). While I cannot fully imagine what it would feel like to live in the society that produced Genesis 22, the text provides a window through which I can contemplate, analyze, and attempt to describe this culture’s aesthetic and ideological values from the methodological perspective that Geertz has articulated.

The foreign qualities that I have identified in Genesis 22 and the intellectual curiosity that they stimulate do not prevent me from empathizing with the authors of the narrative and with the character Abraham as he prepares to sacrifice his son. Although Genesis 22 assumes a hierarchy of values that differs from my culture’s system, it also exhibits similarities to contemporary Western ethics. If the authors of the text unequivocally valued obedience over compassion, they would have allowed Abraham to slaughter Isaac. The fact that they did not indicates that to a certain degree, they shared my culture’s emphasis on compassion and the sacredness of human life.

Furthermore, whether or not Genesis 22 describes his emotions explicitly, I believe that Abraham, as he would have been imagined by the text’s authors and ancient Israelite audiences, experiences anguish and confusion while preparing to slaughter Isaac. Despite the cultural distance separating me from the authors of the text, I find it easy to sympathize with Abraham’s inner turmoil. Admittedly, ancient Israelite audiences probably imagined Abraham’s experience somewhat differently than I do. For example, Abraham’s sense of duty to kill his son rests on his belief that it is always right do what God commands, no matter what God’s orders entail. This is a belief that I, having been brought up in an individualistic North American culture fearful of blind obedience, consider foreign. Consequently, the authors and early audiences of the text probably imagined Abraham to have experienced stronger feelings of resignation and sadness than I would if I were in his position. As a 21st-century Westerner, I might feel angrier and more rebellious, because I would feel freer to call the fairness of God’s command into question. Yet, regardless of the ideological differences separating me from the authors of the narrative, Abraham’s plight moves me in ways that, I believe, generally correspond to the response the

authors intended to elicit. The culturally foreign elements of Genesis 22 surround a relatable emotional core. When I empathize with Abraham or recognize that the authors of the story shared particular elements of my own ethical system, my visceral reaction to the narrative is even more powerful than my responses to texts produced within my own culture, because the familiar aspects of Genesis 22 stand out strongly against their foreign cultural backdrop.

Projection across the Divide

In this and the following section, I will examine foreign texts whose meanings, as understood by their authors and intended audiences, are not clear to me. I will discuss two possible ways of approaching such texts. The first, which I term “projective reading,” involves interpreting foreign texts within the hermeneutic framework of one’s own culture, thereby generating interpretations that differ from the meanings that the texts hold within their original cultural contexts. The second, which I term “reconstructive reading,” involves carefully researching what a text might mean to the culture that produced it, ideally through direct consultation with the authors or with others who have a firsthand understanding of the text’s cultural context. Some texts are more amenable to projective readings than others, usually owing to coincidental resonances between their content and important themes in the foreign reader’s interpretive framework. Likewise, some texts are more amenable to reconstructive readings than others owing to factors such as how much information is available regarding their original cultural contexts and whether individuals who have firsthand familiarity with these contexts are available to help guide the process of interpretation. Reconstructive reading corresponds to Geertz’s ethnographic methods, while projective reading is more closely comparable to Stoller’s approach to foreign texts such as the *genji how*. As I have already suggested, Geertzian modes of reconstructive reading are best suited to maximize the *accuracy* of inter-cultural understandings developed through textual ethnography. Nevertheless, specific aspects of projective reading, if exercised with sufficient caution and scholarly rigour, can contribute to the experiential *depth* of these understandings.

Some foreign texts affect me emotionally in ways that stray significantly from the authors' intentions. I do not fully understand or connect personally with the ideological messages such texts were originally meant to convey or the aesthetic sensibilities that shaped them. I read these texts in ways that are relevant and meaningful within my own culture, but not within the cultural contexts from which they derived. In other words, I project onto these texts meanings that were not originally there. In order to illustrate this process of projective reading, I will discuss two narratives that evoke similar emotional responses in me even though they originated in two quite different cultural contexts. The first text is a short tale that was composed in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic in Sasanian Iraq. Owing to its brevity, I reproduce it here in full:

Rabbah said: "Those who descend upon the sea told me: 'Between one wave and another [is a distance of] 300 parasangs, and the height of a wave is 300 parasangs. One time, we were going on the way, and a wave lifted us until we saw the resting place of a small star, and it was to me [i.e. it seemed to me] like [i.e. as large as] the area for sowing forty griv [a unit for measuring volumes of grain] of mustard seed. And had we been lifted more [i.e. any higher], we would have been burnt by its [the star's] heat.'"⁸

This narrative appears alongside 20 other, similar tales, almost all of which are attributed to specific rabbis (Rabbah is one of the most famous late antique rabbinic authorities), and which together form an extended textual digression in the Babylonian Talmud (a corpus that is normally devoted to the analysis of Jewish ritual law).

The second text that I will discuss is a Kwak'wala narrative from Vancouver Island or its environs, which was documented by George Hunt and published by Franz Boas under the title "Star Story" (1935:92-94 [translation]; 1943:92-94 [original text]). In it, a large group of Gusgimux^w and Gopinuχ^w hunters hunt for sea otters. By nightfall, all but two of the canoes in the hunting party have caught game. These canoes proceed ahead of the others. Suddenly, the hunters in these two canoes catch sight of a sea otter bearing

a fireball "on the nape of its neck" (Boas 1935:94), and they harpoon the otter. It swims out to sea and then up into the heavens, "dragging behind the two small canoes as it was going upward" until it "stuck on our sky" (Boas 1935:94). At this point, the hunters and the sea otter are transformed into Orion and the Pleiades.

The Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and Kwak'wala narratives that I have introduced are, superficially, quite similar. In both tales, seafarers are raised up to the height of the stars. In reality, though, these narratives probably had divergent functions in the respective cultures that produced them. The function of Rabbah's narrative and the reasons for its inclusion in the Babylonian Talmud are mysterious, but the editors of the Talmud likely understood it as a tall tale, a narrative that calls attention to its own falseness by hyperbolically transgressing bounds of credulity (see Ben-Amos 1976). It is more difficult for me, as an outsider to Kwakwaka'wakw culture, to determine the function of "Star Story." However, given that it repeatedly mentions the names of two ancient Gusgimux^w and Gopinuχ^w hunters, it may have served as a source of prestige or as a justification of ceremonial prerogatives held by the descendants of these individuals. It also purports to explain why "these stars [i.e. Orion and the Pleiades] have their names" (Boas 1935:94). While I have not succeeded in determining the meaning of the Kwak'wala name given to the Pleiades in this narrative (k^wama'zo'ye), Boas (1947:212) states that the Kwak'wala name for Orion (?əluzəw'e?) means "sea hunter on flat (i.e. in sky, Orion)." Therefore, "Star Story" may also have had an etiological function, providing a back-story for the name of the constellation Orion.⁹

By contrast, I tend to romanticize these texts as symbolic representations of unfulfilled longing. In both stories, the protagonists are lifted up to the stars. In my projective reading, the starry sky symbolizes an unattainable object of yearning. The stories' brief, understated descriptions of men being transported in watercraft to the altitude of the stars ironically highlight the impossibility of reaching the sky in real life.

8 Baba Batra 73a, Vilna edition, my translation.

9 See, however, Waterman 1914, who argues that even when narratives claim to provide etiological information, this is typically not their primary function.

Even in the two narratives, safe travel to the heavens ultimately proves elusive. The sailor in Rabbah's tale comes close to a star, but he does not reach it, and he reports that if he had, he would have been burnt. The hunters in "Star Story" reach the sky, but as a result, they are permanently transformed into constellations, unable to return home. Therefore, according to my reading, these stories have tragic implications: even in a world in which waves are 300 parasangs high and sea otters can drag men into the heavens, one cannot reach the sky and come back alive. The unattainable remains unattainable.

It is unlikely that my reading of "Star Story" and Rabbah's tale corresponds to how these narratives were understood in their original cultural contexts. While I believe that readers and audiences are entitled to form their own interpretations of texts independent of the authors' intentions, I have discussed my approach to Rabbah's tale and "Star Story" in order to show how textual ethnography should not be practiced. Projective reading is akin to a conversation in which the interlocutors "talk past" one another. Each speaker voices his or her own opinions while failing to understand or refusing to hear what the other interlocutor is saying. By contrast, when practicing textual ethnography, I aim to listen to texts, hoping to learn something new from the foreign worldviews of the authors, rather than trying to remold texts within my own interpretive framework.

Humility in the Face of Uncertainty

Instead of interpreting enigmatic foreign texts via projective reading, one can attempt to understand them with the direct assistance of their authors or other members of the cultures in which they were produced. In order to illustrate this process, I will review my attempts to understand a narrative that was told and subsequently explained to me by Mr. Allen J. Chickite (1937-2015), who lived in the village of Cape Mudge, British Columbia. Mr. Chickite was a member of the We Wai Kai First Nation (one of the most southerly Kwakwaka'wakw divisions), and he identified with the cultural traditions of both the Salishan-speaking groups to the southeast and

the Wakashan-speaking groups to the northwest.¹⁰ In order to give a sense of the style in which Mr. Chickite delivered the narrative, I have used commas to indicate short mid-sentence pauses and hyphens to indicate long mid-sentence pauses:

That's the other one¹¹ with – the – house, that had mazes in it. No one, only, those, that, had the mythical, gift, knew that there was mazes in the house. This, young, princess, she has supposed to have done wrong. And, the father, had to, redeem himself, so he told the people in the Big House, that he must cut his daughter's neck off. No one, knew, that there was a maze in the four corners of the house. The daughter, laughed, when she was being lectured, about, being infidelity. He chopped her head off, but they didn't know that there was a mannequin. She ran across to the next floor, she came up to the other side, she laughed and laughed again. And another man chopped her head off. This went on for four corners of the universe, four times. Then – they took her body, with a burnt seal – shoved it up underneath the, where the fire was, in a casket. And they prayed for four days. People came to see her, while she was burnt alive. On the fourth day, she got up to dance. How did she do that? People thought that, there was mythical powers. It was all, durin', the darkness of the night, candle-lights, fire. How, each potlatch, has, a mythical way, of transpiring, life, and death.

When I first heard this story, it was completely opaque to me. I could not understand what it meant for a house to have "mazes in it." When I tried visualizing this description, I imagined a 19th-century Kwakwaka'wakw house containing a European hedge-maze (an exceptionally crude cultural projection). I was, likewise, confused by Mr. Chickite's sudden, unintroduced reference to a "mannequin" in the sentence describing the initial beheading of the chief's daughter. When the text continues by recounting that the princess "ran across to the next floor," I assumed that "the next floor" was a second

10 I use linguistically oriented terminology here out of respect for Mr. Chickite, who did not use the term "Kwakwaka'wakw" to describe his background. Instead, he used the terms "Salish" and "Kwagul" (Kwakiutl).

11 Mr. Chickite told this story immediately after finishing another one.

storey of the house. I was, consequently, puzzled by the fact that the princess reaches the second storey by “running across,” rather than ascending stairs or a ladder. Furthermore, I was confused by the sentence, “This went on for four corners of the universe, four times.” To what do the “four corners of the universe” refer, and how do they relate to the rest of the story?¹² Finally, and most importantly, I did not understand how the princess manages to revive herself each time she is killed. To me, the story sounded like a dream sequence, and I was open to the possibility that this was Mr. Chickite’s deliberate intention. After all, a surreal aesthetic, with its capacity to create a heightened sense of awe toward the unknown, can have a variety of rhetorical functions. I was also aware, though, that while Mr. Chickite’s narrative seemed dream-like to me, this impression likely reflected my ignorance of the story’s cultural context.

A week after Mr. Chickite first told me the story of the princess, I met with him again in Cape Mudge. I admitted that I was having trouble visualizing the mazes in the house that he had described in the narrative, and I asked what these mazes looked like. He explained that they were tunnels underneath the floor and that they extended between the four corners of the house. As he proceeded to discuss the story, it soon became clear that the narrative describes a ceremonial procedure involving the simulated killing of a princess. During this simulation, the woman travels through tunnels from one corner of the house to the next. Each time she reaches a corner, a mannequin is raised up and beheaded there, and a seal bladder is punctured to make it seem as though the princess has been beheaded and blood is flowing from her neck. Finally, the princess follows a tunnel to the middle of the house, where she stands beneath the fire. A seal carcass is burned in a coffin above the fire, and the princess shouts as though it is she who is being burned. Mr. Chickite described the procedure as a form of “play,” and he confirmed that the princess was beheaded only in “play,” not in actuality. I had

lacked the cultural background necessary to realize that the story depicts a ceremonial simulation rather than an actual execution.

It also became clear that I had overlooked a number of verbal clues to the meaning of the story. Most notably, after recounting that the princess revived and started to dance after being burned for four days, Mr. Chickite said, “How did she do that? People thought that, there was mythical powers.” The phrase, “People thought that,” suggests that although the princess appeared to have been resurrected by means of “mythical powers,” this appearance was illusory. Likewise, Mr. Chickite noted twice that the “maze in the four corners of the house” was kept secret. The secrecy of the maze suggests that it had a role in generating the illusion of the princess’s multiple deaths. While these clues had been available from the start, I needed to hear Mr. Chickite’s explanation before I could recognize their significance.

Even after Mr. Chickite explained the story to me, I realized that my understanding of the princess narrative remained incomplete at best. I could never approximate the full range of interpretations and associations that this narrative might evoke for an indigenous audience with a fuller understanding of the story’s cultural context. The process of reading and interpreting a text has both conceptual and experiential components, but it is difficult for me to capture both at once. When I first heard the princess narrative, my preliminary interpretation stemmed purely from my intuitive impression that the tale is surreal. When Mr. Chickite subsequently explained the narrative to me, I abandoned this initial intuition in favour of a more rationalistic, critical perspective. I came closer to viewing the narrative through Mr. Chickite’s eyes, but I did not progress toward feeling its intended aesthetic effects.

Experiential appreciation of a text must derive, ultimately, from one’s own intuitions. If it stems from another source, it is not genuinely experiential. Therefore, in order to understand the aesthetic and emotive qualities of the princess narrative, I had to allow my intuitions to influence my interpretation of the text. However, in doing so, I risked projecting culturally extraneous meanings onto it. Caught, as I was, between an intellectually accurate but experien-

¹² I still do not know the answer to this question, although I believe Mr. Chickite perceived cosmological symbolism in the princess’s movement through the house. On other occasions, when he told me about the significance of the number four in indigenous storytelling and religion, he mentioned “the four corners of the universe” as one of the quadripartite concepts in his belief system.

tially hollow Geertzian reading, and an intellectually imprecise but experientially rich reading along the lines of Stoller's approach, how was I to proceed?

In an attempt to balance these two approaches, I decided to revisit my intuitions regarding the aesthetic qualities of the text while aiming to remain within the hermeneutic boundaries that Mr. Chickite established when he explained the story to me. Using his explanation of the text, I felt equipped to evaluate critically my own aesthetic, experiential impressions of the princess narrative, asking to what extent these impressions corresponded to Mr. Chickite's intentions and to the meaning of the narrative within its cultural context. I planned to follow up on this critical evaluation by contemplating my aesthetic intuitions again within more refined hermeneutic boundaries, followed, in turn, by additional critical evaluation, etc. In this process of successive alternation¹³ between intuitionist and critical perspectives on the text, I hoped that each phase of intuitive contemplation would add depth to the preceding segment of critical evaluation and that each phase of critical evaluation would add precision to the preceding segment of intuitive contemplation. I knew not to confuse this approach with a genuinely emic reading experience. All that my method would allow me to do is alternate, as a foreign textual ethnographer, between improving the emotional depth and the cognitive rigour of my

13 I borrow directly from Geertz (1975:52-53) the methodological concept of successive alternation between two different hermeneutic lenses. Geertz describes

a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously. In seeking to uncover the Javanese, Balinese, or Moroccan sense of self, one oscillates restlessly between the sort of exotic minutiae ... that makes even the best ethnographies a trial to read and the sort of sweeping characterizations ... that makes all but the most pedestrian of them somewhat implausible. Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts which actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another.

I have quoted Geertz at length in order to make clear the extent to which my proposal regarding methodological alternation is indebted to his notion of "dialectical tacking." The difference between my approach and Geertz's is that whereas Geertz suggests alternating between localized and generalized perspectives on cultures, I suggest alternating between intellectual and experiential perspectives on texts. In this regard, I am also substantially influenced by Geertz's comments regarding the need to strike an appropriate balance between reliance on "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts when conducting "anthropological analysis" (Geertz 1975:48).

interpretation. An emic reading to the text, by contrast, would involve integrating these hermeneutic goals and achieving them simultaneously, which I cannot do given my removal from the cultural underpinnings of the narrative.

I set this exegetical process in motion by allowing myself the freedom to form intuitive impressions of the text while "reading" it (i.e. listening to an audio-recording of it) with Mr. Chickite's explanation in mind. Although I knew that the story describes a theatrical ritual, I still found it surreal. Was this aesthetic impression faithful to the meaning of the narrative within its original cultural context? This is the question I attempted to answer during the subsequent critical, evaluative phase of my exegetical process. I developed the hypothesis that Mr. Chickite deliberately generated the surreal qualities I perceived in the text by juxtaposing images whose relationships to one another are not immediately apparent. I presumed that these aesthetic attributes might have had a specific function in the narrative, namely to blur the boundaries between the appearance and the reality of the ceremonial procedures that the story describes. Although I recognized that I could not expect ritual norms in 21st-century Cape Mudge to be the same as in late-19th-century Fort Rupert, I recalled one of Boas's statements regarding the essential role of illusion in the Winter Dances of the four Kwagwł tribes:¹⁴

The name [of the Winter Ceremonial] is curious, for ts!äqa [the root of the word meaning "Winter Ceremonial"] means "to be fraudulent, to cheat." For instance, when a person wants to find out whether a shaman has real power or whether his power is based on pretence, he uses the term "pretended, fraudulent, made-up shaman." ... Even in the most serious presentations of the ceremonial, it is clearly and definitely stated that it is planned as a fraud. [Boas 1966:172]

According to Boas, illusion is a core attribute of Winter Ceremonial practices, and the entire ritual complex is named for this feature. Goldman

14 The following discussion is influenced by Wolf's (1999:109-110) similar summary of the history of scholarship on this issue, although I emphasize different aspects of Berman's work than Wolf does.

(1975:101-103) has revised Boas's observations regarding the importance of "fraud" in the Winter Ceremonial, positing an essentially Eliadean interpretation (see, e.g., Eliade 1971): the Kwakwaka'wakw use illusory performances to simulate supernatural events during their ritual proceedings because, in the post-mythic era, human relationships with spirits are no longer strong enough for genuine supernatural events to take place. As Goldman summarizes his position, "What was real then is simulated now" (Goldman 1975:103). However, Reid (1979:267-268) attributes more inherent significance to the concept of illusion. She suggests that when a young initiate into the Hamaça dancing society (the highest-ranking ritual grade in the Winter Ceremonial) first becomes fully aware of the theatrical trickery that is involved in Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonialism, he gains the capacity to use winter rituals as "adaptable tools" for communication with society, rather than viewing these rites as rigid and immutable traditions (Reid 1979:267-268). Wolf, along similar lines, suggests that this rite of passage equips young chiefly initiates with "the political knowledge that it takes stage management to project reality" (1999:110).

Berman (1991) argues that mimesis plays more of a symbolic role in Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonialism. Kwakwaka'wakw ritual practices often involve simulating the behavior and appearance of animals and other spiritual beings by donning masks and other forms of disguise (see, e.g., Berman 2000:81-82; 1991:691-692). Interestingly, animals are believed to perform the Winter Ceremonial as well. Their ritual activities involve either putting on or removing their own masks (Berman 2000:73-74) (animals are believed to wear "masks" that give them their animal forms; when they are not wearing their masks, they look like humans [Berman 2000:63]). Berman discusses a text entitled "Night Hunter," in which a human hunter intrudes on a group of seals engaged in Winter Ceremonial performances. She notes,

"fakery" in the winter dances was more than an attempt by the chiefs and nobles to overawe a gullible public. In "Night Hunter," it is the spirits themselves who are the "fakers," masking themselves in flesh and fur. In the human *çičeqa* [Winter

Ceremonial], chiefs are just "imitating" (*nanaxço*) the spirits. [Berman 1991:265]

Berman proposes that the spirits' ability to put on and remove their masks, alternating between human and animal forms and between the roles of predator and prey, is a major theme of the Winter Ceremonial, and that it is precisely this capacity for transformation that human participants in the Ceremonial strive to imitate (e.g. 1991:690-692). Accordingly, simulation is not, as Goldman suggests, a mere substitute for the supernatural realities that are depicted in Kwakwaka'wakw winter dance performances. Instead, the ritualized act of simulation, which is emically identified as such by the term *çičeqa* (one of the titles for the Winter Ceremonial that means "illusions" [Berman 1991:264]) *is* the reality being depicted. Just as human dancers wear masks in order to look like spirits, spirits wear masks in order to look like themselves. When a human dancer puts on a mask, he or she is not just imitating a spirit's appearance; he or she is imitating the very act of donning a mask.

During my investigation of Mr. Chickite's narrative, these previous scholarly arguments led me to the hypothesis that the surreal qualities I sensed in the story might reflect attitudes toward illusion and its role in ritual that are similar to the attitudes Berman has identified in late-19th-century Kwakwaka'wakw discourse. In the narrative, Mr. Chickite repeatedly alludes to the fact that the ceremony he describes is a simulation, just as the word *çičeqa* calls attention to the fact that Winter Ceremonial performances involve mimesis and illusion. Mr. Chickite notes, for example, that "No one, knew, that there was a maze in the four corners of the house" and that "they [the spectators] didn't know that there was a mannequin," highlighting the means by which the princess's death is simulated in the ritual performance. Yet, at the same time, he describes the events depicted in the performance as though they are truly taking place. When narrating the first "beheading" of the princess, for example, Mr. Chickite could have made clear that this act is merely a simulation by stating something along the lines of, "the chief chopped the head off of a mannequin, creating the illusion that he had beheaded his daughter." Or, he could have chosen to

obscure the illusory quality of the act by saying, “the chief chopped off his daughter’s head.” Instead, Mr. Chickite recounts, “He [the chief] chopped her head off, but they didn’t know that there was a mannequin.” The second half of this sentence acknowledges that the beheading is illusory by referring to the mannequin, but the first half of the sentence, understood literally, asserts that the princess truly was beheaded. Similarly, when describing the “burning” of the princess, Mr. Chickite states, “Then – they took her body, with a burnt seal – shoved it up underneath the, where the fire was, in a casket.” The first half of the sentence refers explicitly to the seal, which is one of the props used to create the illusion of the daughter’s death. However, in the second half of the sentence, the antecedent of the pronoun “it” (which refers to the object that is placed in the fire) is ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so. Grammatically speaking, the antecedent could be the “burnt seal,” but it could also be “her [the princess’s] body.” A few sentences later, Mr. Chickite recounts, “People came to see her, while she was burnt alive.” Even after mentioning the seal, Mr. Chickite describes the scene as though the princess is actually being burned.

I have suggested the possibility that in the princess narrative, Mr. Chickite deliberately skirts the boundary between illusion and reality in order to illustrate how these categories of experience are blended in a ceremonial context. However, several months after he shared this story with me, I heard him tell it again to another individual. Mr. Chickite and I were walking through the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, when a young woman politely approached him and asked several questions regarding his cultural heritage.¹⁵ He used the princess narrative to help answer one of her questions. My impression was that this second rendition of the story did not exhibit the surreal stylistic qualities I had perceived in the first rendition.¹⁶ It is possible that Mr. Chickite had differ-

ent intentions each time he told the story, especially considering the different settings in which the respective performances took place (his living room vs. a museum). Consequently, it is conceivable that I was right to identify surreal qualities in his first rendition of the narrative, regardless of whether these qualities were present in his second rendition. However, after hearing him tell the story a second time, I was less confident in my interpretation of the initial telling. I assumed that Mr. Chickite and I would have many subsequent opportunities to discuss the princess narrative, so I did not rush to ask him further about it. Mr. Chickite passed away several months later. I have summarized my interpretation of his narrative in order to illustrate how intuitive-experiential and critical-analytic modes of exegesis can be combined in an attempt to understand foreign texts. However, without the chance to review my interpretation with Mr. Chickite, it remains highly speculative at best. I plan to discuss it with consultants who have a better grasp than I do of the culture-specific concepts underlying the story. Nevertheless, I cannot conclusively determine whether or how my intuitive impressions regarding the surreal qualities of the text correspond to the intentions of the author.

Conclusion

My goal in practicing textual ethnography is to listen quietly and humbly to how members of other cultures express themselves and their outlook on the world. In order to avoid projecting aspects of myself and of my own culture onto foreign texts, I attempt to maintain an appropriate level of detachment from the interpretive process. However, in order to gain an appreciation of texts’ aesthetic, experiential power, I must allow myself to respond to the reading process on an intuitive, emotional level. Balancing between these two mandates is the core challenge of textual ethnography, and I hope that it will be a lifelong endeavour for me as a student of foreign cultures and their texts.

¹⁵ Previously, Mr. Chickite had led a tour group through the museum. The young woman had been a member of this group.

¹⁶ Because of the context in which Mr. Chickite delivered this second rendition of the narrative, I did not interrupt him to ask if I could audio-record his performance. Consequently, I cannot analyze this rendition in any detail, and I must proceed on the basis of my initial impressions.

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