

Discourses in and about Clayoquot Sound

A First Nations Perspective

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Among traditionally oriented Nuu-chah-nulth, discourses about beginnings and about the nature of all relationships are heard from the time of a person's birth. These discourses explain, among other things, the origins of, and relationships between, the diversity of life-forms found in Clayoquot Sound.

The following is one such story told in the house of Keesta. Keesta was born eighty years after fur trading began and forty years before colonial settlement (circa 1900) in Clayoquot Sound. He was my great-great-grandfather, who survived into the 1950s, a full decade after my own birth.

A person is busy fashioning two knives in preparation to resist change. The prophetic word has it that someone is coming to change everyone's life. The knife maker is unaware that the person who approaches and begins a friendly conversation is the one who, in English, may be referred to as the Transformer. The Transformer speaks first.

"What are you making?"

"Knives."

"Oh! For what purpose?"

"They say someone's coming to change us but nobody's going to change me!" (This is said with great conviction and resolve.)

"They are beautiful!!! Let me have a look at those!!!" (The knives are handed over to the Transformer.)

"Here" (placing the two knives on each side of the person's head), "from now on these shall be your two ears and you will make the forest your new home."

And that's how deer came to be.

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This story is set in mythical time, and it offers a non-Darwinian account of the origin of one of Clayoquot's many species. The "origin of species" is in, and from, the first people. Other species, like the deer, are produced from the first people, but they themselves remain essentially like the first people throughout the ages. Creation is already complete at the beginning of historical time—people already exist—but changes, transformations are accepted and expected. This historical process is neither evolutionary nor developmental in the linear sense. Changes are not from simple to complex, as a more modern worldview would have it, but from complex to complex, from equal to equal, from one life-form to another. Biodiversity is produced from common origins; all life-forms are from the same family. In this discourse, which remained unchanged for millennia, Nuu-chah-nulth were encouraged to see other species, as well as other peoples, as equals. More than this, all life-forms, so to speak, sat equally at the same negotiating table as the Nuu-chah-nulth, and from this table came the protocols such as the ceremony to acknowledge the first salmon of the season, or the ceremony to take down a great cedar for a great canoe. It was a time of egalitarian discourse.

Then came the discourse of colonization. The nature of this discourse is unilateral, evolutionary, linear, hierarchical, and presumptuous. It completely overshadowed and ignored the first discourse. Consider the following story that records a conversation between humans only—a Nuu-chah-nulth chief and an Englishman. One of these men will presume to be able to improve upon the original creation through the contradictions of dispossession and enforced assimilation. The first speaker is Shewish, a Tseshaht chief. The second speaker is Gilbert M. Sprout, an Englishman, who records the conversation. This exchange takes place in Tseshaht territory, up the Alberni inlet, in August 1860, around the time of Keesta's birth. The political rumor is that the King George men are coming to dispossess and change everyone's way of life.

"They say that more King George men will soon be here, and will take our land, our firewood, our fishing grounds; that we shall be placed on a little spot, and shall have to do everything according to the fancies of the King George men."

"Do you believe all this?" I asked.

"We want your information," said the speaker.

"Then," answered I, "it is true that more King George men (as they call the English) are coming; they will soon be here; but your land will be bought at a fair price."

"We do not wish to sell our land nor our water; let your friends stay in their own country."

"To which I rejoined: My great chief, the high chief of the King George men, seeing that you do not work your land, orders that you shall sell it. It is of no use to you. The trees you do not need: you will fish and hunt as you do now, and collect firewood, planks for your houses, and cedar for your canoes. The white man will give you work, and buy your fish oil."

"Ah, but we don't care to do as the white men wish."

"Whether or not," said I, "the white men will come. All your people know that they are your superiors; they make the things which you value. You cannot make muskets, blankets, or bread. The white men will teach your children to read printing, and to be like themselves."

"We do not want the white man. He steals what we have. We wish to live as we are." (Sproat 1868, 4-5)

This sort of story is also familiar to the Nuu-chah-nulth. It is not meant to affirm their right to exist or to encourage mutual respect between peoples. It leaves other species out of account completely. It suggests that an alien way of life is to be imposed on Clayoquot, regardless of what is right.

This second discourse, which brought massive changes, is being challenged now, even by some of the descendants of the colonists, as the presumption of colonial superiority is called into question. Postmodern notions of plurality that emphasize egalitarianism have striking similarities to Nuu-chah-nulth conceptions of the relation between life-forms. In fact, a new postcolonial discourse is foreshadowed by the Supreme Court of Canada in its *Delgamuukw* decision (1997). Although the decision is not directly about Clayoquot Sound, its impact is universal in Canada because of the original Crown-First Nations relationship. In the province of British Columbia, where *Delgamuukw* is situated, the traditional territories have never been ceded or sold by the original First Nations owners. Neither have these indigenous territories been conquered, as happened frequently south of the border. The *Delgamuukw* decision, which recognizes aboriginal title, dramatically alters the colonial agenda.

Situating Sproat, the Nuu-chah-nulth chief, and their descendants in relation to one another may be one approach to a discussion of the politics of Clayoquot Sound. Much of the misunderstanding about one another, which is apparent in the second story, continues to the present day. This essay presents my own perspective on the politics of Clayoquot Sound in an effort to clarify some of the misconceptions about aboriginals held by early European thinkers such as John Locke. Locke's work not only influenced colonists such as Sproat, but continues to influence people down to the present day, as Thom Kuehls's essay in this volume indicates. I want to highlight

important cultural strands, which will help to situate the Nuu-chah-nulth chief (and his descendants) as a protagonist in a different story: a story like the first, in which the Transformer—not the white man—appears as a supernatural or divine being.

Let us think through that first discourse (in which the story told here is but one of many). In the beginning was the unity of creation. This unity is exemplified in the Nuu-chah-nulth phrase "hishuk-ish t'sawalk" meaning "everything is one." At that moment of creation everyone was a *quu?as* (a person). Everyone was recognizably people—that is, until the Transformer came and created a great variety of life-forms, among which was *muuwatch*, the deer. Here, biodiversity is by divine design and origin. It situates contemporary people in a particular relationship to all life-forms. Among the Nuu-chah-nulth, this would be sufficient information to explain the necessary protocols developed between humans and animals, between humans and all life-forms. Perhaps others require more explanation.

Creation presupposes Creator whose essence of, and in, the spirit defines the origin and source of everything temporal and physical. Underlying all relationships on earth is the unifying source and demands of the Creator. One of these demands is not to be disrespectful toward any part of creation, because all, in the beginning, were people: *quu?as*. One of the ways to influence the maintenance of the integrity and unity of this creation while engaged in the necessary act of resource extraction is to note the model presented by the Transformer in the first story.

From an empirical, scientific perspective it would appear that the creation of beautiful deer happened at the expense of a person. However, this appearance is misleading. The *quu?as* who became a deer did not die but was transformed by the shedding of one "cloak" or "covering" for another. The shedding of a cloak, giving of flesh, is therefore a divine act of transformation, moving in endless cycles from life to life, giving to giving, transformation to transformation, creation to creation, mutual recognition to mutual respect, mutual responsibility to mutual accountability. In the temporal, physical, and empirical sense, it would be said that the salmon gives its life for the life of others, the cedar gives its life for the life of others, the deer gives its life for the life of others. But for the traditional Nuu-chah-nulth, the salmon does not give its life, but rather, in an act of transformation, is prepared to give and share its "cloak" in endless cycles, provided the necessary protocols are observed (such as the ceremony with the first salmon caught of the season), which indicate mutual recognition, mutual respect, mutual responsibility, and mutual accountability. For the Nuu-chah-nulth, the salmon and deer are brothers, and each is a brother's keep-

er; each is in a relationship of trust and honor. It is natural, among and within fallible humans, as evidenced in the first story, to experience tension between trust and distrust, honor and dishonor. The *quuzas* who changes into Deer is at first preparing to resist this transformation, and this we recognize as a very human response to proposed change. It is an act of free will that is subsumed by divine will, an acknowledged superior order of design. This worldview is in marked contrast to the worldview brought by Sproat.

In the second story, Gilbert Sproat forecasts coming changes to the Nuu-chah-nulth. Where the first story ushered in the awesome wonders, beauties, and bountifulness of biodiversity, the second story ushers in modernity, which meant, for the Nuu-chah-nulth, oppression, dispossession, inequality, poverty, strange sicknesses, decimation, and enforced conformity to European ways of life. A typical and prevailing notion about aboriginals is expressed by a Jesuit missionary in 1632, who wrote the following in his journal:

Their education must consist not merely of the training of the mind, but of weaning them from the habits and feelings of their ancestors, and the acquirements of the language, arts and customs of civilized life. (Cited in Vallery 1942, 114)

As an Englishman once said: "Ah, there's the rub!" The rub is in the assumption that civilization was absent in the aboriginal, and therefore this void had to be filled with the European version of "language, arts and customs of civilized life." Sproat is more pragmatic about what it means to be civilized. He equates it with technology: If you can make and use a cell phone, you are civilized. There are other assumptions of civility such as honesty, virtue, humility, kindness, responsibility, discipline, and so on. What has it meant, then, to bring the cruder, Sproatian version of civilization to the "wilderness"? If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, as Don Quixote says, then one only has to observe the current outcome of the colonizers' agenda. Rather than the expected "good" that colonizers claimed to be bringing to the world, we see instead a threatened state of the earth's environment. Civilization has been brought to the "wilderness" with destructive force. How did the earth come to its current state? What kind of ideas drove the colonizers of the world to bring such ruin to the earth?

Locke, like his contemporaries and subsequent thinkers, thought to contribute to bringing order and good government to an otherwise disordered (read wild, instinctive, savage, barbaric, inferior, without laws and morals) world. His base of observation was a comparatively young European culture just emerging from its own "dark ages." Europe was supposedly

to be rescued by science, but the science at hand was both ethnocentric and disrespectful of the property and sovereignty rights of other peoples of the world. In Locke's *Second Treatise* we read:

Thus we see, that the Kings of the Indians in America, which is still a Pattern of the first Ages in Asia and Europe, whilst the Inhabitants were too few for the Country, and want of People and Money gave Men no Temptation to enlarge their Possessions of Land, or contest for wider extent of Ground, are little more than Generals of their Armies; and though they command absolutely in War, yet at home and in time of Peace they exercise very little Dominion, and have but a very moderate Sovereignty, the Resolutions of Peace and War, being ordinarily either in the People, or in a Council. Though the war it self, which admits not of Plurality of Governors, naturally devolves the Command into the King's sole Authority. (Locke 1988, 339-40)

When Locke, together with other influential thinkers such as Rousseau, Hobbes, and Defoe, speculated about aboriginal existence, he did so, not from empirical evidence, but from the peculiar circumstances of his own cultural experience. Therefore, writing under such ignorant and biased circumstances, Locke could not help but write sheer nonsense about the nature of the aboriginals of America. Without firsthand evidence Locke is able to say that the Indians of the Americas represent the "Pattern of the first Ages," and the meaning of this phrase can be understood from the context of not only his writings, but also the writings of his contemporaries. The "Pattern of the first Ages" is synonymous with the notion of humans in an early evolutionary phase who lack all the European acquirements of civilized life. Again, without any hard evidence, Locke is able, in one phrase, to dehumanize a continent of people, by speculating that they have "no Temptation to enlarge their Possessions of Land." It is this kind of nonsense that contributed to the creation of such enduring myths as the "noble savage." How nonhuman, how unlike the civilized European, must an aboriginal be, who is not tempted in the same way that Europeans are tempted? Yet, beyond all doubt, it is influential thinkers such as Locke who contributed to the politics of Clayoquot Sound. Their misinformed ideas and speculations about aboriginals became the basis for the Indian Act, whose premise is consonant with the notion of the "Pattern of the first Ages." In this act, the Indians of Canada are wards of the state, in the same way that actual children can become wards of the state. The "Pattern of the first Ages" meant that aboriginals were like children who appear early on the

evolutionary scale: innocent, instinctive, undisciplined, wild, without laws and morals. In this imagined state of nature, where there were no notions of property and no lands properly "striated," property and sovereignty were created by the labor of European hands. Until recently, that has been the colonizers' perspective.

However, change seems to be an ongoing characteristic of reality—of which the scenes in the first and second stories are examples. December 11, 1997, marks another change, a legal milestone, away from the dark ages. Only this time it is not the aboriginals who are being forced to change. The Supreme Court of Canada's *Delgamuukw* decision recognizing aboriginal title finally begins to break the colonial stranglehold on aboriginal ways of life first perpetrated (albeit in ignorance—but ignorance of rights is no excuse for violations of them) by the speculations of European thinkers such as Locke and his ideological offspring.

The decision on *Delgamuukw* expands the narrow confines of early European thinking to include another point of view, another perspective. Rather than limiting the notion of property to a particular and peculiar "striation" of land, the Supreme Court discovers that property can also be *sui generis* (*Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, 1997, para. 82, 112, 126) and is also more than a fungible commodity (*ibid.*, para. 129). Title to land is no longer described entirely from Locke's perspective. Aboriginal perspectives are now included. This decision is a triumph of legal, linear, logic.

This legal, linear, scientific logic has its problems, however, especially when it is founded in false premises. The colonizers, once having set themselves up as protectors of childlike aboriginals (a false premise), are now legally bound to carry on this bit of historical fiction created by Locke and others. A complement to this historical fiction is the "honour of the Crown." From a First Nations perspective, the activities on behalf of the Crown have been anything but honorable, and yet the phrase carries on, to good and bad effect. A major part of the historical fiction about aboriginals found its way into Canada's constitution and became the reality, first in the form of the Indian Act, and subsequently as section 35(1) of Constitution Act 1982. The irony is that it is these historical fictions (about the nature of the aboriginal) that later became legal realities. These realities, in turn, enabled the contemporary Nuu-chah-nulth to take an aboriginal rights stand on Meares Island, to which the court responded on its own terms. Environmentalists rejoiced and Clayoquot Sound was "saved" for the moment, but the outcome was not to stop the industrial practices in general. The forest companies simply began to focus their "barbaric and savage" attacks on the environment in other places around the world. This is the current situation

of the politics of Clayoquot Sound from a First Nations perspective. Delgamuukw has changed, and perhaps strengthened, the negotiating position of First Nations, but the ultimate outcome remains to be seen.

In the final paragraph of the Delgamuukw judgment are found these words:

So, in the end, the legal rights of the Indian people will have to be accommodated within our total society by political compromises and accommodations based in the first instance on negotiation and agreement and ultimately in accordance with the sovereign will of the community as a whole. The legal rights of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en peoples, to which this law suit is confined, and which allow no room for any approach other than the application of the law itself, and the legal rights of all aboriginal peoples throughout British Columbia, form only one factor in the ultimate determination of what kind of community we are going to have in British Columbia and throughout Canada in the years ahead.

The final paragraph of the Delgamuukw decision sets the ground rules for yet another discourse, and this may prove a comforting conclusion for the descendants of the colonizers. The Crown has imposed its sovereignty over the land; made some treaty promises (largely unkept) along the way; dispossessed a continent of people of their land, resources, and ways of life; grown to be the wealthiest on the face of the earth while depleting the once vast resources; grown overwhelmingly in population and political power, and it now says, from the vantage point of ascendancy, "the sovereign will of the community as a whole" will now determine our collective futures. From a First Nations perspective the future appears bleak. The "sovereign will of the community as a whole," in practice, has been the major source of Earth's problems with respect to the environment and with respect to the rights of aboriginals. The colonizers and their descendants have still not shown, for the most part, that they are capable of being, and behaving, in a civilized manner with respect to their relationship to the environment and their relationship to aboriginal people.

In addition to the Delgamuukw decision, the current treaty process in British Columbia is setting the stage for scene 4 of an ongoing drama. Scene 1 set the original state of Clayoquot Sound, the resources of which were ably managed for millennia under *ha-huulhi*;¹ scene 2 ushered in modernity and the subsequent devastations, and scene 3 (made possible by the Delgamuukw decision) might be said to usher in a postmodernity that espouses plurality. The discourses of scene 4 will emerge from Delgamuukw and the treaty process.

Civilization, among traditional aboriginals, requires mutual recognition, mutual respect, mutual responsibility, and mutual accountability. The references are not to humans only but to all life-forms, for it is believed that we all have the same source, our lives are bound up together inextricably, making us all relations, "hishuk ish t'sawalk," everything is one. In this view, a concept such as that held by modernity, of an "Other," is a self-destructive concept in practice because it is rooted in the malicious fiction created by early European thinkers about the place of the aboriginal. Postmodernity's notion of plurality is more hopeful because it mirrors the best of the ancient notions held, from the beginning of time, by traditional Nuu-chah-nulth, which is that the treatment of all life should be with respect because we all have the same origins.

Nevertheless, the "honour of the Crown" today has become the honor of postmodernity, the honor of the community at large. The question remains, is the community at large capable of exercising, or allowing, plurality? The question will not be easy to answer because the exercise of plurality will be to admit that the original inhabitants of Clayoquot Sound, and of the Americas, were not the "Pattern of the first Ages" but in fact had ways of life, the best of which, when practiced, could balance individual with group rights without violating the rights of either. The aboriginal genius for the balancing of rights is overshadowed by the current imbalance of the focus on individual rights, which has always resulted, since the onset of modernity, in enormous wealth for some and abject poverty for others. Listen, then, in conclusion, to a voice unheard, or disregarded, by the colonizer, spoken between 1615 and 1625. Sagard, a Recollet French missionary, observed and recorded in his journal the following:

[T]hose of their Nation . . . offer reciprocal Hospitality, and help each other so much that they provide for the needs of all so that there is no poor beggar at all in their towns, bourgs and villages, as I said elsewhere, so that they found it very bad hearing that there were in France a great number of needy and beggars, and thought that it was due to a lack of charity, and blamed us greatly saying that if we had some intelligence we would set some order in the matter, the remedies being simple. (Cited in Jaenen 1974, 282)

The human relationships described here are not a function of a small population, as some have argued in defense of their own lifeways, but of values situated in a particular worldview. Plurality situated in an evolutionary worldview is not necessarily impossible in theory, but it has proven to be a contradiction in practice, whereas plurality situated in a worldview that

permits respect for all life-forms allows the possibility to resolve the paradox of balancing individual with group rights.

Note

1. *Ha-huulhi* is the Nuu-chañ-nulth word that, from a resource management perspective, describes a relationship of people to the environment and its resources. It refers to outright ownership of sovereign territory by the *ha-wilh* (chiefs) and commonly known specific rights held by subchiefs. Resource extraction was conducted through strict observance of sacred protocols that were designed to display recognition and respect in order to ensure sustainability.

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