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A Universe Within: The Coast Salish World

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The Coast Salish landscape of the Northwest Coast is imbued with cultural meaning and an overriding moral presence beyond the understanding of outsiders. The Coast Salish Moral Universe is best understood as a multivariate overlapping site of time, place, human and non-human persons, rights, spiritual power and supernatural history (Bruce G. Miller, personal communication 2011). Its circles radiate outward from the minutiae of tangible sounds, aesthetics, gustatory and tactile experience to intangible manifestations of power and prestige that anchor onto finite and quantifiable resources. Coast Salish can, will and do make sense of intangible and tangible aspects of the Moral Universe without a clear preamble separating ‘the spiritual’ and ‘the material.’ Regarding the Coast Salish world’s people, they are inextricably linked to their Moral Universe through flexible cultural arrangements subsuming the clearly defined group within the larger generalized Northwest coast cultural pattern. And even more relevant to today is Salish hybridization with the Euro-Canadian/American acculturated Northwest coast cultural pattern if applicable. Even though Coast Salish have suffered a loss of intrinsic ties to each other and consequently the Moral Universe because of displacement, depopulation and colonial domination, the Coast Salish Moral Universe is manifest in personal packets of cultural knowledge because Coast Salish individuals bring a wealth of insider knowledge on interactions within the Moral Universe which they preserve in cultural knowledge repositories inaccessible to others.

Coast Salish Now and Then

Coast Salish have been regarded in anthropological and ethnographic inquiry as ‘ancestral,’ underdeveloped and vestigial societies as opposed to their own merits for a stand alone definition. Measuring up the Coast Salish to culture area standards is in large part the Kroeberian legacy. Granted that the Salish world is a constituent of the larger complex Northwest Coast generalized culture area, it is still unknowable without accessing the Salish Moral continuum. Oversimplification of the Coast Salish is a product of racism, forced compliance (without limited Salish participation) and incomplete knowledge of the Salish system of knowing place, in other words the Salish Moral Universe is not valued as it should be. I propose a solution to this undervaluation; Salish ‘cultural space’ is internally consistent with the Coast Salish Moral Universe. From the source of Salish knowledge as cultural reservoir over land they were removed from, people that are no longer living and spirituality that is recovering from suppression by the Canadian and American authorities. The Coast Salish elucidate their specific group over time and space into a complete, holistic demarcation of their own cultural beliefs, values, myth and kin-ties. The Salish are creating a specific world, within a world that I understand as the constituent
definition of their group among the others existing outside of and along side of the Moral Universe. Active Coast Salish effort to shape their Moral Universe is true of historic times, today and presumably into the future. Sonny Challises states that connections between the formal study and oral tradition of the Salish have a dual objective of “building upon what is known and remembering that learning is a life-long quest” (McHalsie 2007:95). Considering this framework, the Salish Moral Universe is clearly separate from the generalized culture area and understandable as its own specific set of internally consistent ordered connections.

COAST SALISH MORAL UNIVERSE DICTATES CULTURAL RANGE

The most fundamental distinctions in Coast Salish belonging are language and geography, as most outsiders understand it. Syncretism and acculturation are inadequate models to explain what is happening to the Coast Salish Moral Universe as it interacts with the unfamiliar. Historical linguistics and geographic approaches take into account the blending of alien and familiar, but not just the notion of a Euro-Canadian/American and Coast Salish world. Pursuing a career in seasonal wage labour takes Salish people away from their families and concentrations of the familiar, but to a lesser extent when it was “Indian business” (Bruce G. Miller, personal communication 2011). Coast Salish working with other Salish mediate the subtle effects of the Moral Universe with the powerful effects of the world system. Traditionally, the Euro-Canadian/American world was perceived by experts to be a neat cleavage line separating the alien from the familiar in the Coast Salish world. Coast Salish who became insiders in the Euro-Canadian system could not remain insiders in the Coast Salish Moral Universe. Salish people historically did and continue to move from ancestral territories with solid kin connections to cities where fictive-kin systems are essential. Additionally, in isolated resource stations, the lack of interconnected family support does not diminish the “Indian” experience as much as reorients it. In the case of forestry jobs, Coast Salish are relocating away from reserves and river and estuary sites to upland prime timber regions or unrecognizably polluted sloughs for canny processing amidst wholly artificial surroundings (Bierwert 1999:234). Amidst unfamiliar places, people and dialogues, Salish assert their “conviviality, family connections and [cooperation]...” dealing with non-natives, bosses and accumulative incomes beyond conventional Salish Moral Universe classification (Bierwert 1999:246). The Coast Salish are bringing their Moral Universe along with them regardless of language and geographic gradients.

COAST SALISH PERSON TO PERSON TRANSMISSION

Coast Salish insider knowledge is like an onion; it’s layered onto each preceding layer as time goes on. The Salish Moral Universe is persistent because it is the interactions of daily subsistence, long term goals and history rolled into easily understandable, relatable packets. McHalsie raise the point that individuals are repositories of story, place and time based on their relation to each other as he quotes Peter Dennis’s knowledge of the Moral Universe; “Your grandfather knew way more than ... I did” (McHalsie 2007:96). What this means to the study of the Salish Moral Universe is that availability of and drawing upon knowledge is individualized and personalized. The knowledge-bond is based on the relationships between the narrator and narratee. McHalsie goes on to say that what he learned, and the
potential to learn from others was tempered, or enriched by affiliations of person to person and generation to generation. McHalsie emphasizes that the persistence of knowledge is more than the sum of one person’s experience in the following statement, “my grandfather … that’s my personal connection to the spot” (McHalsie 2007:106).

The activity of the Indian Shaker Church in western Washington and Southwestern BC appears to be a Christian service based institution on the surface, but the deeper layer is personal connections between members. The key players in the Church were politically linked kinship groups that preserved solidarity in a manner that was acceptable for the time (Bierwert 1999:146). Christianity has a shallow time depth in the Salish Moral Universe so that Shaker church practices were deeply embedded with conventional Salish imagery, allegory and objectives. Service and practice were individualized, open-ended and reflected “differences in individuals’ relationship to the [practitioners]” (Ebert 2005:161). Salish regard Christian services as “unseen… cold and… [symbolically] hollow…” when contrasted with the religious diversity among Salish people (Bierwert 1999:164). Opposition to longhouse traditional ceremony and spirituality usually stank of vested interests. Revivalists are breaking apart overly rational thinking and complacency within the Salish Moral Universe and empowering economic and political change in their own communities. Pamela Amoss places personal relationships foremost in the Salish spiritual traditions (Amoss 1978:173). But most importantly, Diamond Jenness’s Salish Informant, Old Pierre, connects Catholic belief as simultaneously “far away” and closely compartmentalized within the Salish world with full validity resting on the local practice (Jenness 1955:10). A Moral Universe based out of Europe, with papal authority held little real appeal to the Salish compared with the local practitioners and spiritual exploits inherent in their personal histories. The social relations and person to person interaction are subtly complicated by age, class and gender as one would expect from the few practitioners with a full grasp of the knowledge contained within the Moral Universe.

MINDMAPPING AND COGNITIVE INSCRIBED SPACE

Coast Salish people ranged over a large spatial area because of a strong connection to each other, utilizing flexible cultural arrangements to transfer gains from person to person. Island Hul’qumi’num peoples participated in the Fraser River salmon fishery even though their primary residence was within the Gulf Islands, Cowichan and Nanaimo river valleys (Grier 2004:174). The Moral Universe was shared between these oftentimes separated peoples in pragmatic terms by orchestrating “food[sharing], wealth, ritual knowledge, resource access…alliance and marriages” (Grier 2004:174). What went beyond the banal business of land use and family connections in the seasonal round was access to powerful places and artifacts accessible to the Salish because they were profoundly connected beyond residence. Specific places and resource sites held spiritual and prestige power that were available to the Coast Salish alone. Particular systems devised by sub-units of the Salish such as tribal groups, or hunters within the group were carried over into the larger sphere of shared Coast Salish knowledge. The Lummi for example were hunters of renown and were able to hunt wild deer with great success which was
tapped into by their larger related kin group (Ebert 2005:55). The transmittance of tangibles from one sub-unit to another was carried out in such a way as to complement the production, exchange and relationship of people, place and time following formalized procedures recognizable beyond strict reciprocity of available goods as Collins observed; “…gifts of smoked shellfish [were] acceptable and gave, in exchange, dried venison” (Collins 1974:51-52)

Coast Salish from different regions recognize Shannon Falls in Southwestern BC for its legendary creation by a Sea Serpent spirit (Maracle 1998:172). The spirit of place, “shxwelî” connected people with ancestral pasts and transformative places, but more significantly the memory of people’s experience (McHalsie 2007:118). People who are capable of recognizing the particular lessons of Shannon Falls and passing it on to their kin-relatives are included in Coast Salish membership across age, language and gendered divisions. “S’ó:lmexw…the underwater people” are another example of non-humans who do not have the capacity to interact in normal ways with the human tangible world but affect the Salish Moral Universe forcing them to conform to rules though not all Salish know why (McHalsie 2007:126). The underlying purpose of transformation in Salish mythic-history is to render recognizable the dependence of individuals on each other and enforce a collective standard of basic relationships beyond acquisitions into other territories. McHalsie places great emphasis on the functioning of the system from an individual level organizing collective action as follows; “You know the water babies [S’ó:lmexw] take care of us and we take care of them. There’s always this reciprocation.” (McHalsie 2007:126).

The furthest regions of the Coast Salish Moral Universe contain similar counterparts of mutually intelligible landmarks, features and spiritual anchors that serve as cognitive mind maps. Material and economic exchanges in Obsidian and Nephrite stone available from the FraserCanyon presented another restricted Salish intergroup tie (Grier 2004:175). Both static and portable symbols of spiritual transformation have a deep history among all the Coast Salish. Petroglyphs for the SteinValley in upriver Salish territory attest to dream revelations that would regularly be transmitted from person to person among the Salish (York 1993). Annie York explains that specialists had interpreted human and semi-human encounters and rendered them according to cultural expectations. Anthropomorphic incised stone bowls recovered in the San Juan islands may have functioned as personal mementos from spiritualists upriver to their counterparts in the Gulf Islands. To the Coast Salish, spiritual “cultural space” signified when language and geography became important in demarcating inside and outside boundaries that all Salish could understand and agree on. Coast Salish confer knowledge through a formalized system. The system is maintained in powerful restrictions, desired actions and implied meanings such as “just talking about that one place…you learn…where children weren’t allowed. (McHalsie 2007:99).

INTRINSIC TIES? AN ASSUMPTION TO BEGIN WITH: LEARNED AND (IMPERFECT) CULTURALLY TRANSMITTED FALLIBLE LINKS

The Salish world is not connected through laws of absolutes but relationships
of cultural and natural systems radiating outward in gradations of language, kin-
connections and acculturation to the outsider lifestyle. The Coast Salish language
families are mutually intelligible and in the past Salish people would take the time to
learn other languages for the purpose of trade and making alliances. Person to
person transmission of the Moral Universe underlies all essential interlinkages in the
Salish world. At English camp in the San Juan Islands, archaeological excavations
suggest that flatfish and land mammal hunting rounded out the ancient subsistence
practices before an almost exclusive ocean salmon and herring economy emerged
(Stein 2000:99). Outsiders would be more comfortable understanding a set of laws,
but the Salish are not utilizing that system, rather their own Moral Universe is non-
absolute and bounded by ‘fuzzy’ geographical and linguistic boundaries. Mark
Ebert considers nested, inherent relationships between people, in temporal and
spatial terms to have an ‘anchor’ or personal connection organizing receding
outward linkages, an ‘anchored radiance’ (Ebert 2005). Boundaries are not
problematic in this reading of the degree of outsideness or insideness in Coast Salish
terms. Ebert explains that being human, did not mean speaking the Coast Salish
language or living within its geography, since recognized categories of non-humans
persons, spirits and outsider humans were conversant with Salish people and
coexisted in their space (Ebert 2005:66). Snyder makes a further distinction that
children, the elderly and spiritual practitioners could commune differentially with
forest spirits although their powers of communication with other Salish may be
limited (Miller and Snyder 1999:166)

The Coast Salish are forming, and reforming dynamic patterns of relations
according to a scale of risk vs. returns. Learning English and interacting with the
Hudson’s Bay Company Traders as far as marrying into their Euro-Canadian
personal networks did not compromise the Salish Moral Universe. In the ideal Salish
experience, “prestigious names radiated throughout the region” so being known
outside of your geographic area was both a material benefit and evolutionary
adaptation (Ebert 2005:102). Names were known past the life and death of
individuals and were used for Salish commemoration of the individual packets of
knowledge that they formerly held. Circulation within the Moral Universe exposed
individuals to “learn[ing], different locally anchored knowledge and practices” in
order to best utilize changing conditions, and navigate advantageous intra-personal
relationships (Ebert 2005:102). New types of relationships increased an individual’s
potential network and could initiate someone entirely non-Salish into preferential
relations with the larger Salish society. Having greater social and economic
diversification through exogamy gave the Salish more resource access and
functioned to strengthen the HBC traders’ access to the landscape. The success of the
Coast Salish interaction with the HBC is clearly explainable by their flexible cultural
arrangement, in opposition to the ranked, closed system of the Northern West Coast
tribes which did not integrate on good terms. Salish relate to each other in learned
quantifiable approaches to interaction, alliance and reciprocity. But they connect with
each other on a deeper level dependent on qualitative transmissions of spiritual
rights, historical practices, and ritual responsibilities.
FACT OR FICTION: COAST SALISH HAVE LOST INTRINSIC TIES TO THE MORAL UNIVERSE?

If the Coast Salish Moral Universe has been compromised by modernity, then this is true of any society in a spiritual crisis. Coast Salish spiritual propagation was de-prioritized while Salish people made extraordinary efforts to minimize the damage of major appropriations of native landbase by the Canadian state and alleviate pressures on segmentary lineages during succession phases. But unlike other complex societies, Salish interlinkages do not diminish as they pursue material measures of affluence. The Coast Salish have not lost their links to each other since their interlinkages do not follow a formulaic pattern as other groups on the Northwest Coast did. Their segmentary lineages went through lifecycles of ascension, maturity and decline, not always conferring the same concentrations of power to a succeeding generation. When examined by contemporary social scientists, emphasis is placed on the revival of Salish spiritual, moral, educational and social values. The full suite of revival starts strengthening everything from person to person. As well, marriage relations purposefully augmented spatial and temporal ties over the Moral Universe with men and women avoiding their closest relatives and preferring to tie together distant and less related Salish. The idea of Clan relationship categories to marry into for perpetuity, especially closely related cross cousins is a foreign (near incestuous) idea to the Salish (Bruce G. Miller, personal communication 2011). The Salish were not diminishing their Moral Universe through time, but adapting to an unforgiving capitalist system at the expense of cultivating comprehensive Salish arisen ties to each other.

RECOGNIZABLE INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

The Coast Salish Moral Universe is internally consistent and persistent as a deep source of knowledge and a surface ordering of complicated natural and social systems. The Coast Salish manifest their internal consistency through the spiritual power of transformation in the being; Xals. The transformer’s place is to create a universe of expanding and transgressive boundaries or exclude tangibles within the boundaries. Salish spiritual beliefs are a ‘flexible cultural strategy’ to ensure that they never lose out to the inflow of new, better and unfamiliar culture, material and lifeways. The Coast Salish spiritual linkages are local and reflect movement over place and time interacting with a group of people who do not necessarily share very close geographical relations. Ethnographic description of the Star Child narrative explicitly states the relation of geography and language in the Coast Salish Moral Universe;

It is through the actions of Star Child that place, humans, and language are connected as these narratives recount his Travels... [in Puget Sound to the Puget Salish]. (Miller and Hilbert 1996:154-155)

The narrative discusses geography and language as useful indicators of the Coast Salish Moral Universe, but the deeper meaning is knowledge transmission. In this case it is not person to person but spirit[ancestor] to person. And more so;
Because their [mythic ancestors] transformation occurred at particular locales, they became associated with them. Some were transformed into particular landmarks or features of the landscape, others became various plant and animal species, and all became guardian spirits. (Elmendorf, 1960:536, 1977:70; Miller, 1999:50)

Transformation in the Coast Salish context allows introductions of new and non-native plants, animals and people into the Moral Universe with little upset. Even native narrations of linear change tie into transformation like the full-on arrival of Sockeye salmon in “different places, like Coquitlam and Pitt River, the Harrison River, the Chilliwack River. Wherever they threw the diapers, that’s where there are a lot of salmon. Then they brought the sockeye baby all the way up to Yale...” and the connection between them implies that all could have happened at the same time (McHalsie 2007:103). The early contact period and post contact cultivation of blackberries, potato (wapatto) on the mainland and sheep at Cowichan in Salish Island territories was acceptable as the transformative and non linear actions of the Transformer. The power to understand, reorient and continually revitalize within the boundaries of Salish places, families and ways of knowledge is recognizable and consistent. The Coast Salish have built in their own historic definitions of the familiar and the non-familiar that overlap and support each other but remain their fundamental character of default continuous history and culture versus compartmentalized use.

Take the example of warfare according to the Coast Salish. Warfare conformed to a precise format because of the regulation of the Salish Moral Universe. Salish people would never justify cooperation with Northern Raiders to get what they wanted from other Coast Salish by force. Friendly trade with cooperative and willing outsiders like the Okanagan tribal groups played out as straight reciprocity without the spiritual and temporal hostility “[Stol:ø Salish] used to trade with the Okanagan people” (McHalsie 2007:115). Spiritual and Temporal force that the Salish used on each other intensified competition at potlatches, and weaponized resources that they could have been utilized for warfare actual instead of chastising prestige displays. Within the Coast Salish Moral Universe, power was defined in Coast Salish terms. Salish mobility came into play when they called up a standing army to defend against raiders, alliances called on because the enemy was not from the Salish intra-group but beyond the limits of the Salish world and fair game for deadly violence. The Coast Salish would conform to each other’s dominance and intransigence with proper conduct and limited violence when and if necessary. The groups beyond the Coast Salish boundaries were unable to be regulated, intrusive and of frozen social mobility thus making them impossible to be appeased which would work on other Coast Salish antagonists.

COAST SALISH MORAL UNIVERSE ARCHITECTURE

Coast Salish people were open to influence from outside groups. Coast Salish had proved to be historically capable of whaling even though it seemed to be a particular borrowing from the Wakashan groups. Kroeber would place such outsider adoptions squarely in the “adoption of world culture” or pan Northwest Coast

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phenomena (Donald 2004:325). But even with non-Salish practices and intrusive cultural developments, the Salish valued what they recognized as their own. Some elements of the Coast Salish Moral Universe went deep and others were tenuously veneered onto the surface, and in danger of rejection. Consider a version of the ‘Battle with Snow’ myth from the Interior Salish as an intelligible lesson for Coast Salish. The themes of interdependence, cooperation between regularly oppositional animals and humans resonates with the necessary cooperation, complementarities and cause and effect that insider and outsider forces exert on Coast Salish lifestyles. The myth recounts the heroic actions of people and animals, their worlds being interlinked, in a fight against five snows (Teit 1917[1969]:76). The story is multi layered, explaining how certain animals cooperated in the right way and others in an unacceptable way. Mythic accounts are indicating the duty of people to remember past contributions of other Salish, and be grateful for worthy or heroic actions that saved people from worse fates. Even outsider wisdom is useful in the Coast Salish Moral Universe maintain awareness of the multi-dimensionality of ‘cultural space.’

Sonny McHalsie relates the deep meaning of economic and family ties in the internal consistency of Salish spirituality backing up places such as “Xoletsa …[for berries] but also a spiritual place” (McHalsie 2007:101). The Moral Universe according to the Salish is nuanced by overlapping spheres; social, economic, ritual-historic, mythic, and natural. The more personal places are to the Salish, the more secure they fit within the boundaries of the Moral Universe. Although the unequal division of knowledge is apparent in the engagement of individuals over, across and within the landscape as McHalsie qualifies as follows; “You talk to different elders about each of those places, and each of them has a different experience or a different story. And we can learn from all of them” (McHalsie 2007:102). Coast Salish move within their cultural space, and boundaries become apparent, the social, ritual-historic and mythic spheres give way to strictly economic and natural landscapes. The Northern tribes of the Northwest Coast and far into the Interior of BC are socially, ritual-historically and mythically naked to the Salish despite their shared engagement with the natural and economic landscape.

CONCLUSION

The Salish cultural area is a culture area in its own, difficult to distinguish on the outside due to surface similarities with natural and physical environment with the rest of the Northwest Coast groups. Culturally, some traits appear common with other Non-Salish people but the same can be said of any people worldwide with reasonable geographic proximity. The clear separation of the Moral Universe from the others, with its organizing and categorizing mythic, ritual-historic and spiritual rubrics is Coast Salish entirely. The Coast Salish place in the NWC by their own measure was unbeknownst to the Kroeberians and beyond understanding from the outside. The personal cultural knowledge of the Coast Salish is available exclusively through their understanding of overarching principles of the Moral Universe. Access to their cultural pattern is limited without a great effort to understand the Moral Universe as the Coast Salish understand it, in personal ritual, social and natural dimensions, a universe within an universe.
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