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## When You Sing It Now, Just Like New : Re-Creation in Native American Narrative Tradition

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## **When You Sing It Now, Just Like New: Re-Creation in Native American Narrative Tradition**

ROBIN RIDINGTON

*University of British Columbia*

### **INTRODUCTION**

'When you sing it now, just like new,' said Tommy Attachie of Dane-zaa (Dunne-za) songs and stories. It was the summer of 1998 and Tommy and I were cataloguing material for a CD of songs and oratory by the Dreamer, Charlie Yahey. Tommy is a Dane-zaa elder and song-keeper. He told me that:

All these songs, how many years ago.  
Makenunatane yine (songs of the dreamer, Makenunatane),  
and Aledze, Maketchueson, Nachan. (names of other dreamers).  
How many years ago. Old prophet.  
When you sing it now, just like new.

Tommy was reminding me that oral narrative tradition is a performance genre. When you sing the songs of the old prophets, they become just like new. Tommy reminded me that singers and storytellers recreate rather than reproduce material from their cultural tradition. Dennis Tedlock made a similar point when he said (and then wrote) that stories in Zuni oral narrative are interpretive performances:

They exist only in the form of interpretations  
and it takes a multiplicity of voices to tell them.  
[TEDLOCK 1991: 338]

Stories from Native American oral tradition are interpretive rather than canonical. They live in the communal space shared by storyteller and listener. They live when a knowledgeable storyteller gives them voice for a particular audience. They live in a succession of creations and recreations. They live in the breath of their tellers. For thousands of years, storytellers have kept their oral traditions alive by 'singing them now,' and by so doing, making them 'just like new.' Each telling is an interpretive recreation rather than a recitation. Each telling realizes a shared creative authority. This paper will discuss how contemporary Native Americans continue to recreate their narrative traditions using the wide variety of settings and media now available to them. The narratives that people from hunting and gathering traditions tell today derive from the adaptive and communicative tradition that I

have called 'narrative technology' [RIDINGTON 1999a].

## NATIVE AMERICAN NARRATIVE TECHNOLOGY

Although all technology may be viewed as being knowledge-based, the techniques with which people in Native American hunting and gathering economies relate to one another and to their environment are particularly dependent on knowledge held by individuals. They are communicated through discourse and oral tradition. Hunting and gathering people, both men and women, maintain intimate physical and interpersonal relations with the animal people and personified natural features of their environment. Humans and animals are principal characters in stories that define their relations to one another. Their material world is also a storied world [CRUIKSHANK 1990; 1998]. Communication within a matrix of social relations that includes relations with animal people is central to the forces of production in a hunting and gathering economy.

A significant ecological fact of the hunter's environment is that animals live lives that are autonomous, and independent from those of humans. The 'subject centered knowledge and skills', to use Ingold's term, [1993: 439] of hunter-gatherer epistemology includes an understanding that animals are also willful and subjective beings. Hunting technology is based on the premise that, in order to be successful, the hunter must negotiate a relationship with his game. Relations with these beings are essentially interpersonal relations. Hunters may persuade and even coerce animals [BRIGHTMAN 1993: 186-192], but they do not own or control them in the way that people in other economies do domestic animals. Animals behave as they do for their own reasons, not for the benefit of humans. Similar relations obtain between humans and personified natural forces. The Biblical promise of dominion over the natural world does not apply to North American hunter-gatherers. Even the complex ranked societies of the Northwest Coast are not, in their epistemologies, functional equivalents of agricultural or herding societies. Their relations with the natural environment have more in common with band-level hunters and gatherers of North America than with the agricultural and pastoral societies of Biblical tradition.

The narrative technology of hunting and gathering cultures, including those of the Northwest Coast, allows them to be remarkably flexible, adaptable, and ready to take advantage of variations in the resource potential of their environment. Information necessary for informed decision making is widely distributed among adult members of the community or throughout subgroups (such as clans) within a larger community. It is distributed throughout a matrix of multiply linked stories and shared experiences in a way that is analogous to the web of linked information available electronically on the world wide web. The links are different, of course, in that they exist in the minds of human beings rather than in digitally stored code. Stories are stored in a way that resembles the distribution of visual information in a holographic image. Each part retains an image of the whole. Parts of stories are still stories. Stories remain meaningful even in small segments. Each story suggests every other story. In the technology of storied experience, the events of a person's life suggest connections to the voices and actions of both human and non-human persons.

## NARRATIVE TRADITION CONTEMPORARY MEDIA, AND THE PIZZA TEST

The narrative traditions of Native American hunters and gatherers have entered the contemporary world through a variety of media. Contemporary hunter-gatherers continue to use the modes of discourse that are familiar to them, even as they take part in the affairs of nation states. Hunters and gatherers of North America have always brought their world into being through dialogue with each other, and with a variety of other human and non-human persons. They still converse with one another, and with outsiders, through the discourse of oral narrative, conversation and oratory. In addition to using these traditional media, they also speak and write about land claims cases, they communicate as teachers, they create visual art and they write fiction, non-fiction and poetry. This paper will suggest that the discourse modes of hunters and gatherers may be more definitive of the hunting and gathering way of life than the simple maintenance of a particular economy. It will review examples of Native American oral tradition and will show how hunter-gatherer discourse continues to exist in a variety of contemporary contexts.

The idea that hunting and gathering constitutes an ancient and distinct adaptation to the resource potential of an environment has energized writers as varied as Heroditus, Lewis Henry Morgan, Otis T. Mason, V. Gordon Childe and Julian Steward. It has held together sufficiently well to provide a title and common ground for the CHAGS series of conferences, now in its 8th incarnation. As scholars and, more recently, aboriginal peoples have come together in the shifting foraging territories of CHAGS, some of us have wondered whether our subject matter was rapidly disappearing. Indeed, we may have to ask ourselves whether or not 'pristine' hunters and gatherers should be confined to the initial stages of unilineal evolution. Maybe, as revisionists have implied, the only real hunters and gatherers exist in Morgan's state of 'savagery,' untouched by the influences of 'barbarism' or 'civilization.' If this is the case, our field of inquiry would become less and less ethnographic and more and more like classical studies, as the economic and media forces of globalization reach previously remote places.

If we define hunting and gathering strictly in terms of subsistence technology practiced by people untouched by outside influence, it might be possible to argue, as Wilmsen [1989] did in his challenge to Lee, that even type cases like the San are not true hunter-gatherers. This revisionist line of argument brings to mind an only slightly apocryphal story from recent Canadian legal history. In a case involving the demonstration of aboriginal rights by a First Nations group, lawyers for the crown asked a plaintiff about what foods she ate; fish, moosemeat, berries, grease—'Yes.' Then came the clincher. What about Pizza? 'Well yes, I eat pizza sometimes.' Voila! The lawyer argued that she could no longer claim aboriginal rights because pizza is not an authentic aboriginal dish. This argument has entered a folklore shared by participants in land claims issues as 'the pizza test.' The same principle was applied with an even heavier hand by the Canadian government when, for a time in the nineteenth century, it automatically removed Indian status from any aboriginal person who received a university degree, on the grounds that 'educated' Indians were no longer real Indians.

More recently, British Columbia Supreme Court Chief Justice Allan McEachern wrote

in his Delgamuukw decision [MCEACHERN 1991] that while the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en plaintiffs were aboriginally, 'a primitive people without any form of writing, horses, or wheeled wagons,' [25] 'witness after witness admitted participation in the wage or cash economy' [56]. For McEachern, such participation negated the plaintiffs' claims 'for ownership and jurisdiction over the territory and for aboriginal rights in the territory' [297]. In his eyes, the plaintiffs had failed the pizza test. Portions of his trial decision were later overruled by the Supreme Court of Canada.

## MODE OF THOUGHT-MODE OF DISCOURSE

Alan Barnard has argued a view that is contrary to the pizza test. He writes that 'Former foragers persist in thinking like foragers, as mode of thought is more resilient than means of production' [BARNARD 1998: 1]. In his view, 'hunter-gatherers tend to have a political ethos in which leaders emerge for specific tasks. The position of leaders is not hereditary.' While this formulation applies to band level foraging societies and their descendants, it does not fit the ranked societies of the Northwest Coast of North America. Therefore, I would like to expand on Barnard's idea and suggest that a hunter-gatherer 'mode of thought' is not limited to low accumulation economies with egalitarian social systems. Rather, it is characterized by a mode of discourse that facilitates the use of narrative technologies. Among people with hierarchical social systems and hereditary leadership, these technologies take the form of clan histories such as the Gitksan *adaawk* and the Witsuwit'en *kungax* [GISDAY WA and DELGAM UUKW 1989]. I suggest that Barnard's 'foraging mode of thought' is a subset of a larger hunter-gatherer mode of discourse that applies equally to low accumulation foragers and high accumulation maritime hunters and fishers.

The academic deliberations of scholars documenting hunting and gathering cultures have become material to political and legal issues being raised by contemporary hunters and gatherers. Binding our definition of hunter-gatherer culture too closely to 'authentic' aboriginal activities may inadvertently support the efforts of state institutions to deny a variety of aboriginal rights. While the scholarly aim of accurate description and analysis should not be influenced by political issues, we must be aware that agents of the state may seek to use our theoretical constructs to further the suppression of aboriginal rights by defining them out of existence.

In the rest of this paper I shall discuss aboriginal authenticity among North American First Nations in relation to their mode of discourse and narrative technology. Are aboriginal people from hunting and gathering traditions who eat pizza (or those who have law degrees or teach in universities or write novels or practice in the visual or dramatic arts) no longer authentically aboriginal? Must we relegate them to the status of *former* hunter-gatherers? As I have indicated in the introduction, my answer to this question is a clear, 'No.' I will present evidence that people from North American hunting and gathering traditions continue to use aboriginal modes of discourse and narrative technologies as they negotiate relations within the larger society.

## STORIES OF THE VISION QUEST

Empowering personal experiences like the vision quest enact narrative episodes that are well known within a community through the medium of oral tradition. Storied events and characters become parts of a human being's identity through his or her conversations with the powerful beings represented in narrative. Hierarchical and clan-based societies institutionalize vision quest stories in ritual theater performances such as the Kwakwakawakw Hamatsa dance. People in band-level societies enact stories more individualistically. In my own work with the Dane-zaa, I have heard many stories about how parents sent their children into the bush to receive power from an animal or a natural feature of the land. In each case, the child was prepared for his or her experience, because the stories of these animals continue to be part of a shared narrative tradition. In each case, power comes through conversation and shared knowledge.

The Dane-zaa vision quest links a person's biography to the mythology of his or her animal or natural helper. The animal's story functions both as shared myth and as personal biography. As a person matures, he or she begins to enact events from the vision quest encounter in subtle ways that allow community members to guess at the person's power. Elsewhere, I described the Dane-zaa view of knowledge as power:

To know something is to have both experienced and interpreted it. The vision quest is an intensely personal transformative experience which possesses all Dunne-za children. The medicine powers that grow out of this experience are socially validated personal interpretations of traditional stories. [RIDINGTON 1990: 20]

Narrative technology enables hunters and gatherers to use such strategies as seasonality and the scheduling of resource procurement. It places emphasis on the authority of individual intelligence supported and enabled by shared knowledge, mutual understanding, and a common social and material environment. In a volume on 'The Social Dynamics of Technology,' I wrote:

Aboriginal people of the North American subarctic have evolved adaptive strategies that place great emphasis on the authority of individual intelligence within the social responsibility required of a system in which animals and humans alike are interdependent members of a single community. They recognize that success in hunting and other activities depends more on the possession of knowledge and reciprocities with other persons than on the possession of particular material goods. They rely on narrative knowledge in the possession of individuals, rather than on knowledge that is mediated through supra-individual institutions.

[RIDINGTON 1999a: 180-181]

Obtaining knowledge and power through vision quest encounters is typical of many North American hunting and gathering cultures. Okanagan elder Harry Robinson describes the vision quest among his people as a form of discourse:

You got to have power. You got to, the kids, you know. They got to meet the animal, you know, when they was little. Can be anytime till it's five years old to ten years old. He's supposed to meet animal or bird, or anything, you know. And this animal, whoever they meet, got to talk to'em and tell'em what they should do. Later on, not right away. And that is his power. [ROBINSON 1992: 10]

One of the stories in Robinson's *Nature Power* tells about hunters taking a boy to an avalanche-strewn gully to obtain power from a stump that had survived there for centuries. After the hunters left, the boy encountered a chipmunk living under the stump. The chipmunk spoke to him as a boy like him:

You my friend.  
 You boy, and I'm a boy.  
 We both boy.  
 So, it's better to be friends  
     instead of making fun out of me.  
 Now, I'm going to tell you something.  
 This stump—you think it's a stump—  
     but that's my grandfather.  
 He's a very, very old man.  
 Old, old man.  
 He can talk to you.  
 He can tell you what you going to be.  
 When you get to be middle-aged or more.  
 [ROBINSON 1992: 29]

The boy then saw the stump as an old man, who tells him that his power will be to ward off bullets, just as the stump has resisted avalanche stones. The power becomes part of the boy's identity through the agency of a shared song:

And he started to sing.  
 He sing the song.  
 That old man.  
 And the chipmunk was a boy,  
     turn out to be a boy.  
 He sing the song.  
 The both of'em talked to him.  
 And he's got two power.  
 And he sing the song.  
 The three of'em sing the song  
     for a while.  
 [ROBINSON 1992: 30]

As the above story illustrates, Native American hunting and gathering technology is embedded in social relations between human and non-human persons. It is enacted through discourse and empowered by narrative. Native American creation stories provide a model for storied discourse. They typically bring the world into existence through conversation between beings who inhabit a world of beginnings. In a version of the common earth-diver story told by the Maidu of northwestern California [SHIPLEY 1991: 18-19], Earthmaker refers to himself in the plural as 'we two.' In conversation with himself, he asks, 'Well, you are very powerful to have thought this world into being.' He then extends his conversation as a song, directed to the land itself; 'Where are you, little bit of earth?' As the creation progresses, Coyote and Meadowlark join the conversation; through it, they become agents of the creative process. Earthmaker thinks of other names, and these become other sentient beings including, finally, those of the human kind.

The narrative traditions of Native American hunters and gatherers do not come to an end with the first taste of pizza. Instead, storytellers are quick to incorporate new experiences into their storied world. In my work with the Dane-zaa I was initially puzzled by a story about choices made by the first people on earth that included a reference to cartridge belts [RIDINGTON 1999a: 178]. When I asked the translator what word the narrator had used, she told me it was *atu-ze*, literally 'belonging to arrows.' Rather than fixing Dane-zaa identity by reference to discontinued items of material culture, the narrator and translator told the story with reference to contemporary experience. The story was about how people continue to use tools and a knowledge of the environment in making a living, not about defining Dane-zaa hunters as users of bows and arrows.

Native American hunters and gatherers continue to live by the dialogue through which contemporary members of these communities negotiate relations with one another and with other persons in the world surrounding them. For the purpose of this paper, I will include northwest coast peoples as well as subarctic, boreal forest, plains and plateau peoples as hunter-gatherers. The following are some of the ways contemporary people from these traditions have described their relationships to one another and to the land.

## NARRATIVE TECHNOLOGY AND THE LAW

Assuming that the adaptive strategies of Native American hunters and gatherers are embedded in dialogue and narrative traditions, I return to my previous question about how narrative serves contemporary members of First Nations communities. In addition to the continuing practice of narrative discourse within the confines of face-to-face communities, hunting and gathering people of North America have participated in a number of performance genres through which they seek to negotiate relations with the nation-states within which they find themselves. Some of these have involved presenting themselves in courts of law. A classic case of representation and negotiation occurred in the aforementioned Delgamuukw case. Hereditary chiefs of the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en First Nations of northwestern British Columbia brought a court action against the provincial government to establish aboriginal title to their traditional lands. In his opening statement, Chief Delgamuukw told the court that:



For us, the ownership of territory is a marriage of the Chief and the land. Each Chief has an ancestor who encountered and acknowledged the life of the land. From such encounters come power. The land, the plants, the animals and the people all have spirit—they must be shown respect. That is the basis of our law.

[GISDA WA and DELGAM UUKW 1989: 7]

The chiefs went on to explain that oral traditions (*ada'ox* for the Gitksan, *Kungax* for the Witsuwit'en) are empowering stories that constitute title to traditional territories. The Witsuwit'en described their *Kungax* as a 'trail of song' that links 'the land, the animals, the spirit world and the people' [GISDA WA and DELGAM UUKW 1989: 30]. The testimony that Delgamuukw (the spelling now in most common usage) and other First Nations witnesses gave before the court was a challenge to the language and premises of western law. It asked the judge to consider the validity of alternative legal principles. In his trial judgment, Mr. Justice Allan McEachern limited his definition of aboriginal rights 'to the use of the lands in the manner they say their ancestors used them' [MCEACHERN 1991: 15]. The plaintiffs appealed McEachern's trial judgment, and the Supreme Court of Canada overturned his rulings on the validity of oral tradition. Before that happened, though, members of the First Nations communities had an opportunity to express themselves in a conference organized to review the implications of the case. One of the participants was Witsuwit'en chief *Wigetimstochol* (Dan Michel), who spoke in a way that embodied the genre conventions of First Nations narrative. He told conference participants of the lessons he teaches his grandchildren when he takes them out hunting:

God created us to be what we are, an Indian. We belong to these lands. It would be like those animals—there's a horse and a cow, and it's impossible for a horse to try and be a cow. That's how it is if we're going to try and be a white man. We're not created to be a white man. [CASSIDY 1992: 62]

Michel went on to describe the importance of what his grandfather taught him about the land and its animals:

I met up with the grizzly bear about six or seven years ago. It just came back to me what my grandfather said about this great animal. He said, "When he is coming at you, don't get nervous or excited. Just face him. He wouldn't run over you." I remembered that, and as soon as I remembered those words, I was so calm. I wasn't even nervous. I had my gun ready and trained on him. I let him come just as close as these first row of seats. That's when he stopped.

He followed this story with another about encountering a grizzly bear with some officials from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

I said, "Have you ever seen a grizzly bear go fishing?" They said, "No." "Well, again, it was given to him by the Creator. That grizzly bear has got his right to go fishing the

way he was supposed to do. Nobody tells him how to fish. If you see a grizzly bear out fishing, do you give the grizzly bear a permit to fishing?" They said, "No." "So therefore you don't need to give me a permit. I go fishing when I need to go fishing."

Dan Michel's story applied the teaching of his grandfather to his relations with government officials. The story uses metaphor to demonstrate that his relationship with the grizzly stands for the overall relationship of his people to their ancestral lands. His story articulated fundamental principles of Witsuwit'en law. Fisheries officers are not part of aboriginal Witsuwit'en culture. They are new, but unlike pizza and cartridge belts, they threaten to override that culture rather than enhance it. In his narrative, Chief *Wigetimstochol* applied traditional law to a contemporary situation. The Witsuwit'en identify their law as *yinkadinii'ha ba aten*, 'the ways of the people on the surface of the earth' or as *deni biits wa aden*, 'the way the feast works' [MILLS 1994: 141]. According to Mills, 'The principles of Witsuwit'en law define both how the people own and use the surface of the earth when they are dispersed on the territories and how they govern themselves and settle disputes when they are gathered together in the feast' [op.cit.]. She quotes Chief *Samoo*h (Moses David) as saying:

*Kus* (eagle down) is like a peace bond. This is the way our law was passed on by our forefathers and grandfathers. This is the way we should be living today, each one of us, instead of following the White man's law. [MILLS 1994: 141]

Chief *Wigetimstochol*'s beautifully crafted oral performance used a traditional narrative form to apply the law Chief *Samoo*h described to a very contemporary situation. Rather than being obsolete and archaic, Gitksan and Witsuwit'en narrative technologies continue to provide an appropriate means of dealing with current legal and political disputes.

## THE PROBLEM OF DISCOURSE

In *Apsassin v. The Queen the Dane-zaa and Cree of the former Fort St. John Band* claimed compensation for breach of trust in the sale of the reserve lands known in the Dane-zaa language as *Tsuu nedzi gedgi*, 'the place where happiness dwells.' Lawyers for the plaintiffs identified 'the problem of discourse' as a key to their argument. By this they meant that the judge would have to accept and understand the discourse of First Nations witnesses, some of whom did not speak English. In a paper about the trial I wrote:

The oral traditions of people who are native to this land are a form of discourse that connects them to the land and to the generations that have gone before. Their discourse has given them a highly developed form of government that is different from our own. Their discourse honors individual intelligence rather than that of the state. Their discourse also demands a responsibility to past generations, to the land, and to generations as yet unborn. Their discourse honors and enables both individuality and social responsibility. [RIDINGTON 1990: 190]

Despite the inability of the trial judge to accept or understand Dane-zaa discourse, the plaintiffs pursued their case through to the Supreme Court of Canada. There, they won a favourable judgment on part of their claim, and subsequently were able to negotiate a final settlement of \$147 million. Chief Gerry Attachie was present at CHAGS 8 and gave a narrative of his experience in the case. The following is an excerpt of what he told the conference participants:

Good morning. I want to thank you for inviting me here. This is the first time I came across the big water. We call it "big water" in our language; people from across the big water.

We're one of the First Nations that signed the treaty with the Europeans about 100 years ago, 1899 or 1900. About around in the mid 1800s there was a gold rush going on up in northern British Columbia. When these people, Europeans, they want to go up to Alaska to look for gold and before they do that they have to ask for permission from our people. But our people don't want them to go through 'cause there were lot of games in those days, and then. We're the hunters and trappers all our life. I still trap. I'm going to trap this winter again, and last winter did some trapping. I still have some furs in my house, which I didn't sold.

Anyway, in the mid-1800 they try to go through but they were turned back by our people. In late 1800 they came back again and they want to sign some kind agreement so they could get our permission. Finally, later on, they came up with the treaty. That's when the treaty was signed, 1900. And about around 1916 they give us 18,000 acres reserve, number 172. We had that reserve up to 1945. Nineteen-forty-five, after the Second World War, they want that land for returned veterans. For a long time our leader, our chief, didn't want to give up the good land. But they keep after him between 1940 'till 1945. Finally, in 1945 the surrender took place, in September. And after 1945 we didn't have a reserve, 'till 1950.

So we live at a little place called Peterson's Crossing. It was hard to get wood, I remember. Hard time, but we spent 10 years there. In 1960 or '61, we moved to a place called Doig, Doig River reserve, which is 15 miles east of Peterson's Crossing. There they built a school, they built six houses for families, and that's where we start to go to school. When the surrender took place 1945, our people were told that they going to get a lot of money. But for a couple of years, I believe that according to some of the elders, they only had \$10 apiece. A couple years, then that was it. After, they asked a few questions, but it was really hard.

There was a lack of communication between Indian Affairs and our leader. That's what I believe. I was elected for councilor 1974, and 1976 I was elected for chief. So I started, I want to work with the Indian Affairs. I want to communicate with. Fort St. John is our town, our home town. That's where their office is, 40 miles away. Here I set up a meeting with an Indian Agent. We had coffee, talked, and later on weekend we could have beer together. We start to communicate. I told him, "Let's work together," and he agreed. That's how this land, Montney court case came about, 1975 and '76. Anyway, we took it. I didn't know it's going to take 20 years. I didn't

know. Finally we took it to Supreme Court in Canada, 1995, and we won it. But between 1976 and 1995 we lost quite a few people, especially the elders. They pass on and they didn't see the settlement. That was a sad part.

Nineteen-ninety-five we win the court case in Ottawa, Supreme Court, and we supposed to go back to court and then ask for how much we want. And later on I had a call from the lawyers, our lawyers. "Come down to Vancouver," so I did and then first it was \$85 million, I think \$85 million, and then we didn't took it and it went up to hundred and five million. We refused, and up to hundred and twenty-seven. We refused. Hundred and forty, we didn't took it. And when they went to \$147 million they said, "We can't go any further." And I took it back to the elders and then the elders said, "Well, we waited twenty years. Too long. Let's go for it," they said. So that's how. It's out of court settlement. We could have still go back to court and ask for more, but it's too risky, I thought. Well, that's it.

And we're a spiritual people. I just want to share, I forgot one thing here. I, about a week ago, I dream about where, just before I went to bed I thought, "I wonder where we gonna, where I gonna go at this meeting?" So I went to bed and here I had a dream that I came into a building, this building, where I came in yesterday and then, I supposed to go up the stairs and then east to the right hand side there's a stage below there. I dream about that you know. Same thing. I share that with Robin. Those kind of things that we got from our creator, I still hang on to those, you know. I thank God for them.

One of the elders who gave testimony in the 1987 trial was John Davis. He lived to see the settlement in 1998 but died later that summer. In a paper entitled 'Cultures in Conflict: The Problem of Discourse' [1989] I described the testimony of John Davis and how it was received. John Davis spoke in the Beaver language and his words were translated by Lana Wolf. In response to a question about his early memories from counsel for the plaintiffs, he replied:

Long time ago, when there was no whitepeople, there were two stores. One of the storekeeper's names was Davis. What I can remember I will say. What I do not remember, I will not say. I cannot read and write. I can only remember. Before the whitemen came, we were bush people. When they came, where we live, they said, "This is my land," and we have no more. We can't read or write. We only can remember it. Since not too long ago that my people started to go to school.

John Davis spoke simply about his memory and experience. He continued with his recollection of the meeting at which the crown claimed reserve land had been surrendered. John Davis was a man of knowledge. He described himself as belonging to a generation of 'bush people.' He understood the animals and the land, but the tools to deal with the institutional authority of the state were not part of his cultural knowledge. The trial judge, after hearing the testimony of this man and others concluded that the Dane-zaa,

... had no organized system of government or real law makers. They also lacked to a great extent the ability to plan or manage, with any degree of success, activities or undertakings other than fishing, hunting and trapping. It seems that many of their decisions even regarding these activities, could better be described as spontaneous or instinctive rather than deliberately planned.

[ADDY 1987 cited in RIDINGTON 1990: 188]

In both *Delgamuukw* and *Apsassin*, First Nations plaintiffs approached Canadian courts using narrative and discourse from their own traditions. They asked the judges to accept aboriginal systems of law and government based upon narrative and oral tradition. While both cases were unsuccessful at their initial trials, both achieved some measure of success in the Supreme Court of Canada. The Supreme Court ruled in *Delgamuukw* that oral tradition should indeed be accepted as a demonstration of aboriginal title [LAMER 1997: 3]. In *Apsassin*, the same court ruled that the Doig and Blueberry First Nations did have cause to receive compensation for the loss of mineral rights to the former reserve. The lengthy court proceedings have themselves entered the oral histories of these First Nations.

## **NARRATIVE TECHNOLOGY, PIZZA AND CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE GENRES**

Native American oral narratives are highly novelistic and therefore highly dialogic in their genre conventions. They use metaphors that relate to shared experience and mutual understanding. They often include dialogue embedded within a third person's narrative. Sometimes they even become theatrical when the narrator forsakes his or her own voice to present dialogic quotes in the voices of other characters. Episodic interrelated vignettes performed by a knowledgeable narrator are typical of Native American oral literatures. Each story builds upon every other in a network of interconnection. Each telling of a particular episode allows the listener to recreate it and the entirety of which it is a part. He or she puts the pieces together in a way that is similar to the process by which the reader of a written text becomes an author of his or her particular reading. The story has its being as a conversation between narrator and listener. As Tommy Attachie told me, 'When you tell it now, just like new.'

According to literary critic Michael Bakhtin, the novel is a living form of expression. He writes, 'Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue' [1984: 293]. The act of reading brings a written text into the conversation of a person's life. It is not surprising that a number of First Nations writers have chosen to express themselves in the dialogic genres of novels, short stories, poetry, and drama. Aboriginal oral tradition is particularly resonant with postmodern literary forms. Native American literature has become very good and relatively well known since D'Arcy McNickle wrote his pioneering novels in the 1930s. Writers whose work embodies Native American narrative traditions include Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor, James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, Jeannette Armstrong, Tomson Highway, Sherman Alexie and Thomas King.

In a thesis on 'Storyed Voices in Native American Texts,' Blanca Chester argues that

Native American writers give new and revitalized tellings of old stories by adapting familiar narrative strategies to new situations. 'Every act of representation,' she writes, 'also tells us another version of an old story, the interpretation itself becoming a part of the narrative in its new context' [CHESTER 1999: 232]. In contrast to Walter Ong, who argues a sort of literary version of the pizza test (writing restructures consciousness and obliterates pristine orality) Chester suggests that Native American writers 'construct dialogic interactions between readers and written texts that resemble the interactions between storytellers and audiences.' Thus, she writes, 'The reader is part of the story of each novel; the story is an old story' [238].

King's *Green Grass, Running Water* is particularly close to the genre conventions of Native American oral literature in its use of voice and dialogue. It tells old stories in new settings. King gives full credit for the voice he uses in his novel to Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson [GZOWSKI 1993]. His work presents a strong case against the pizza test of aboriginal authenticity. King himself is of Greek and Cherokee descent, and his work is informed as well by the time he spent listening to Indian stories when he was director of the First Nations Studies department at the University of Lethbridge. The novel is, among other things, King's reading of North American literature, literary theory, Native American history, and popular culture through the images and genre conventions of American Indian oral tradition. King's characters include Blackfeet university professors and four old Indians named The Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye who turn out, the reader discovers, to be First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman in disguise. Written as a pastiche of episodes in which each story contains something of every other story, the novel is held together by the narrative voice of Coyote acting as contrary, trickster and even God.

In a paper called 'Theorizing Coyote's Cannon: Sharing Stories with Thomas King,' I suggested that, 'If academic theorizing is usually a product of argument and monologue, First Nations theorizing would have to be the product of conversation and dialogue' [1999b: 19]. King uses the novel to demolish literary critic Northrop Frye's monologic and euro-centric structural theory. In the story, Frye becomes Dr. J. Hovaugh, the head doctor in a mental institution for old Indians. 'Native American theorizing,' I wrote, 'sounds different from that of non-Native Americanists. Its vocabulary and genre conventions are those of oral narrative, ceremony and visual representation.' When the name is spoken out loud, King's J. Hovaugh transforms into Jehovah. Frye, who wrote a book describing the Bible as *The Great Code* tries to play God, which prevents him from entering into conversation with First Nations reality. In contrast to Frye's image of Canadian identity as a 'garrison mentality,' with hostile and incomprehensible savages lurking in the wilderness, King and other First Nations writers center their narratives in a richly storied homeland where new experiences (like pizza) simply create new stories.

King has written and performed with two Cree actors in a weekly fifteen minute radio show on the CBC radio network, ironically called 'The Dead Dog Cafe Comedy Hour.' Like his novels, the show uses a contemporary comedic medium to convey serious messages about the enduring qualities of aboriginal experience and narrative tradition. It offers biting social commentary from a First Nations perspective. King is also producing a series of

ironic portraits of Native American artists wearing Lone Ranger masks. The truth of a story, King says, lies in its pattern of relationships rather than in the events of a particular telling. In a paper entitled 'How I Spent My Summer Vacation,' King presents multiple versions of a story he may or may not have heard from a woman named Bella at the Blackfeet Sun Dance. His narrative is an example of the recursive epistemology he describes, in that the story is itself a retelling of Canadian author W. O. Mitchell's classic novella, 'Summer Vacation,' whose narrators tell the same story in multiple versions. In King's version of the Mitchell/Bella story, he comments that academic historians,

...like our history to be authentic. We like our facts to be truthful. We are suspicious of ambiguity, uneasy with metaphor. We are not concerned with essential relationships. We want cultural guarantees, solid currencies that we can take to the bank.  
[KING 1998: 248]

Bella, by contrast, 'believes that history and story are the same. She sees no boundaries, no borders, between what she knows and what she can imagine. Everything is story, and all the stories are true' [KING 250]. Bella's view reflects that of the reader/author in the following exchange between Coyote and the authorial 'I,' in *Green Grass, Running Water*:

"I GOT BACK AS SOON AS I COULD," says Coyote. I was busy being a hero."  
"That's unlikely," I says.  
"No, no," says Coyote. "It's the truth."  
"There are no truths, Coyote," I says. "Only stories."  
"Okay" says Coyote, "Tell me a story." [KING 1993: 326]

The truth is in the story, not in its parts and particulars. Transformations are possible and indeed necessary. Archetypal creation goddesses become four old Indians with names from English literature. *Atu-ze* become cartridge belts. A stump becomes a grandfather. Ownership of territory becomes a marriage of the chief and the land. Witsuwit'en law defines how the people own and use the surface of the earth. Indians become professors of English literature. Indians eat pizza and put on a radio show from the Dead Dog Cafe. Indian writers continue to work within an oral tradition.

Humor and irony are highly developed in the work of contemporary Canadian First Nations visual artists, such as Carl Beam, Bill Powless, Gerald McMaster, Shelly Niro, Lawrence Paul and Jane Ash Poitras. Their work embodies what Allan J. Ryan, quoting Carl Beam, calls 'the trickster shift' [RYAN 1999]. A typical work is McMaster's ironic painting entitled, 'Shaman explaining the theory of transformation to cowboys.' The image is of four impressionistic cowboys in silhouette facing an abstract horned skull. The title, written across the bottom of the painting, sets the viewer's mind in motion as much as the image itself. Indian theory is embedded in narrative. Like King, McMaster plays transformative games with the popular stereotype of cowboys and Indians.

Another recently popular Native American writer is Sherman Alexie. His *Reservation Blues* plays out the story of what happens when legendary African American blues singer

Robert Johnson shows up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Like King's novel, Alexie's shows how contemporary Native American experience brings together a wide range of cultural influences. His Indians not only eat pizza; they form a blues band called Coyote Springs. The novel is rich in dialogue and irony. It reads very much like the kind of oral narrative that continues to be told in First Nations communities today. Alexie has also written the screen play for a highly acclaimed film, *Smoke Signals*, which is directed, acted and produced entirely by Native Americans. The film is particularly successful in its use of humor to show the viewer that authenticity and contemporaneity are not mutually exclusive. Real Indians do eat pizza, write novels and make films.

A passionate and articulate proponent of Native American discourse is Jeannette C. Armstrong, a novelist, poet and director of the En'owkin International School of Writing in Penticton, British Columbia. As a native speaker of her Okanagan language, Armstrong has tried to achieve an English prose form that does justice to the thought patterns and imagery inherent in Okanagan. 'Times, places, and things,' she writes, 'are all made into movement, surrounding you and connected to you like the waves of a liquid stretching outward' [ARMSTRONG 1998: 190]. In her novel, *Slash*, she consciously uses English syntax and vocabulary to evoke the Okanagan sense of movement. She cites the opening lines of the book's epilogue as an example:

Tonight, I sit up here at the Flint Rock and look down to the thousands of lights spread out in the distance where the town is creeping incessantly up the hillsides.

Across the Okanagan valley the sun begins to set. Blazes of mars-red tinged with deep purple and crimson brush silvery clouds and touch the mountain tops. The wind moans through the swaying pines as coyotes shrill their songs to each other the gathering dusk. Long, yellow grasses bend and whip their blades across cactus, sand and sage. [ARMSTRONG 1985: 253]

Armstrong suggests that even, 'Okanagan Rez English has a structural quality syntactically and semantically closer (than standard English) to the way the Okanagan language is arranged' [1998: 193]. The Okanagan stories that Harry Robinson told in English to Wendy Wickwire illustrate this point [ROBINSON 1989; 1992], as does the Robinson influenced dialogue in Thomas King's work. Okanagan reality and that of other Native Americans, Armstrong writes:

...is very much like a story: it is easily changeable and transformative with each speaker. Reality in that way becomes very potent with animation and life. It is experienced as an always malleable reality within which you are like an attendant at a vast symphony surrounding you, a symphony in which, at times, you are the conductor. [ARMSTRONG 1988: 191]

In Okanagan storytelling, she goes on to say:



...the ability to move the audience back and forth between the present reality and the story reality relies heavily on the fluidity of time sense that the language offers. [194]

This distinctively aboriginal quality of moving the audience back and forth between present and storied reality helps explain the transformations and trickster shifts of authors like Alexie, King, Highway and others. Every story does contain every other. Coyote and pizza can exist within the same narrative. Rather than being contaminated by Robert Johnson and the Lone Ranger, aboriginality thrives upon these additions to the storied universe. Harry Robinson's creation stories contain references to the white people precisely because these people are part of contemporary Okanagan experience and need to be explained. Dane-zaa stories about the first people mention cartridge belts because they are part of contemporary Dane-zaa experience. Some of the literary devices commonly associated with postmodern literary forms turn out, in fact, to have been fundamental to First Nations oral literature all along.

As Julie Cruikshank argues in *The Social Life of Stories*, First Nations storytellers 'use narratives to dismantle boundaries rather than erect them,' while at the same time constructing 'meaningful bridges in disruptive situations' [CRUIKSHANK 1998: 3-4]. Cruikshank traces Yukon narrative deconstruction to disruptions of the nineteenth century, but I think she would agree with Armstrong that Native American storytellers have always moved their audience between present and storied realities. In a very real sense, the listener has always shared authorship with the narrator; the symphony has been one in which at times, 'you are the conductor.' Thomas King makes a similar point when he identifies the 'I' of his novel as the reader who becomes the storyteller [King personal communication].

## CONCLUSION

While the hunting and gathering mode of production ultimately brings about a range of distinctive expressive forms, it would be premature to say that these forms must disappear as soon as people make contact with another system of production or medium of communication. Indeed, the narrative genre conventions of Native American hunting and gathering cultures allow them to express an energetic form of neo-premodernism within contemporary society.

Gerry Attachie described a classic visionary hunt-dream in which he visualized the building he would be visiting in Japan. He had already entered into conversation with the place prior to experiencing it directly. He has added his experience of the conference to the storied world of Dane-zaa discourse, a world that now includes reference to the Supreme Court of Canada. An older generation told stories about Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company. Gerry's generation tells stories about Indians and the Supreme Court of Canada and a hunter-gatherer conference in Japan. Harry Robinson tells about Coyote and Neil Armstrong being on the moon together. Tom King transforms Northrop Frye into Jehovah and Coyote's dream into a contrary Indian dog who thinks he is God. Sherman Alexie's version of the contrary in 'Smoke Signals' is two women whose reservation car will only go in reverse. Gerald McMaster's Indians teach cowboys about the theory of transformation.

Jeannette Armstrong sees Okanagan thought patterns in 'rez English.' Delgamuukw tells the Supreme Court of British Columbia that 'ownership of territory is a marriage of the chief and the land' [1989: 7]. Chief *Samoo* tells the same court that 'Eagle down is our law.' Dan Michel informs a conference of lawyers and academics that a Grizzly Bear instructed fisheries officers about aboriginal fishing rights.

Narrative technologies that helped people negotiate relations with the non-human persons of a natural environment can be adapted to the purposes of negotiating and articulating relations with the institutions of nation states. Aboriginal people of North America have been successful in presenting themselves to courts of law and to courts of public opinion. Through an astute combination of honesty and irony, they have made themselves known in jurisprudence, in literature and in the graphic and performing arts. Native literature is becoming widely read and respected as a legitimate expansion of the canon. Who knows? After the CHAGS conference in Osaka, the Dead Dog Cafe may offer sushi as well as pizza.

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