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Raven Goes Mainstream? The Challenges of Transference and Translation of Northwest Coast Indigenous Oral Traditions to Modern Children's Literature.

Roots and Branches:

*The Raven must be **the** raven of mythology, not just another bird.
In mythtime, the animals were the equals of humans and the
latter are always referred to with the article present.*

Bill Reid, The Solitary Raven

Amongst the indigenous cultures of the Americas, the societies that have called the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America home for millennia create a distinct iconic imagery in the minds of all who have come into contact with them. The elaborate art forms, which reach a zenith in the monumental sculptural traditions of the totem pole, the complex social structures, musical traditions, and rugged, dramatic homeland environments of these peoples, have permeated the psyche of other human societies the world over.

The lifeblood and current behind all of these cultural achievements and markers is, in fact these societies' equally impressive and complex oral storytelling traditions. In fact, it is these stories that inspire, shape, drive and inform all of the other facets of these cultures. The masking tradition, which is a way of bringing the stories to life with the assistance of the plastic arts, is often experienced out of context when they hang lifeless on a museum wall. The winter storytelling ceremonials that these masks were utilized in have to be experienced firsthand to begin to truly understand what these art forms mean and how they all form parts of an ancient, holistic storytelling tradition.

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These stories recount the experiences and deeds of the people's ancestors, and are generally considered the property of the various kinship groups, or clans that together create an elaborate web of social and ceremonial relationships that span the entire coast. The kinship systems of the Northwest Coast are characterized by a complex conception of ownership. Property, both tangible and intangible is bestowed upon an individual *and the collective* through *clan membership* and includes group ownership of crests, songs, names, stories, and geographic land holdings. As such, these forms of property were regulated and maintained for millennia. Delicate social balances were struck and maintained, and when breached, often led to conflict and at times, bloodshed.

The existence of supernatural beings, both benevolent and malevolent, anthropomorphized animal societies, and the use and reality of healers and sorcerers were and are part and parcel of these traditions. The existence of parallel animal societies, often characterized as *ancestors or relatives* speak volumes to the reliance that these societies had on the animal kingdom for their very survival.

The Challenge

In his posthumously published series of writings, the Haida master carver Bill Reid lamented a "peculiar custom which has arisen among ethnologists of omitting the article when referring to the heroic creatures who populate the mythworld of the Northwest Coast and capitalizing their English species designations: Raven, Halibut, Bear etc., instead of the raven, the halibut, the bear, etc." (Reid 201) He felt that that by dropping the article, these "experts" were in fact diminishing these supernatural titans and reducing them to "imagined characters in quaint folktales of unsophisticated, simple people-if such ever really existed." (Reid 204)

Recognizing that all of these stories entered popular consciousness through the extensive corpus of anthropological literature of the last two centuries, and taking into consideration Haida Elder Bill Reid's criticism of this very same literature, it is fitting to examine how these stories have been translated into modern children's literature. The complicated and hazy issues of ownership and intellectual property¹ must also be brought to bear on how these stories have made the quantum leap across time and culture.

Reid continues to sum up his criticism of anthropological treatment of the indigenous "mythworld" by concluding that

"this strange practice (of omitting the article) is also followed in nearly all editions of emasculated, hygienized, colorless versions of already bowdlerized legends intended to give the very young their first lesson in misunderstanding the native people and their cultures-usually with bad illustrations to demonstrate that tribal art should look truly primitive and not all neat and complex and disturbing like those strange, smoldering things safely locked up in museums." (Reid 201)

How has modern children's literature fared? In this paper, these issues will be examined, utilizing indigenous voices/views and the writings and research of Betsey Hearne, folklore scholar and professor emerita at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois.

¹ In 2007 the United Nations adopted *the Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples* which states in Article 29:

"Indigenous peoples have the right to own and control their cultural and intellectual property.

They have the right to special measures to control and develop their sciences, technologies, seeds, medicines, knowledge of flora and fauna, oral traditions, designs, art and performances."

Dr. Hearne has written several extensive articles on the transmission of culturally specific folklore across cultures and media and how problems can arise in the process. She has also provided us with an extensive rubric with which to analyze and examine how successful or unsuccessful writers have been in these efforts. In her two part article *Cite the Source: Reducing Cultural Chaos in Picture Books, Part One* and *Respect the Source: Reducing Cultural Chaos in Picture Books, Part Two* Hearne examines authenticity, context, source citation, and cultural authority in establishing what goes into crafting quality, *respectful* cross-cultural examples of children's literature. In a later article entitled *Swapping Tales and Stealing Stories: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Folklore in Children's Literature* Hearne reexamines all of these issues and augments the discussion by delving into "permission" and "cultural assertion", two elements that play a key role in story transmission amongst the indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast.

For this paper, the author will examine three children's titles that receive their inspiration from stories told from Vancouver Island in British Columbia, north to Yakutat Bay, in modern Alaska. It should be kept in mind that the author is himself a member of a Northwest Coast tribal society and is firmly grounded in that culture, with its attendant history, cultural norms, and stories. Betsy Hearne's rubrics and traditional Northwest Coast cultural norms and worldviews will be applied to these three stories to see how well they fare in this ongoing dialogue.

Clamshell Boy: A Makah Legend by Terri Cohlene

The story of Clamshell Boy, which exists in various forms amongst the Wakashan language speakers of West Vancouver Island, Neah Bay (Washington Makah), and the various Kwakiutl groups of the B.C. mainland, is a story that entered children's literature in 1975 with the publication of a Coast Salish version of the story entitled *The Adventures of Yoo-Lah-Teen* by Ellen Pugh.

This much shorter and less complex version of the story was published in 1990 as part of the Watermill Press *Native American Legends* series. The story recounts the adventures of Clamshell Boy, whose miraculous birth from the tears of grieving mother is followed by a quest to rescue children kidnapped by the fearsome Basket Woman, a supernatural ogre-like being that lives deep in the Rainforests of the North Pacific.

Charles Reasoner, the illustrator of the book, does a fairly good job of depicting traditional Makah cedar bark clothing and headgear, but falls short in his depictions of the decorative art forms of the Makah. Like their cousins on the west coast of Vancouver Island, the Makah have a very distinct curvilinear visual art form *that is distinct* from all others on the Northwest Coast. What we are left with are depictions of the art that are a hodge-podge of various tribal styles from the coast with a complete loss of the cultural style of these related peoples of the southern coast. Although the Makah headgear is depicted accurately, another cultural error is that they are "Whalers Hats", which were items reserved only for aristocratic men who had undergone ritual purification and had completed many successful whale hunts. The dangerous nature of the hunts, coupled with a person's hereditary rank, gave them the right to wear them. Obviously, Clamshell Boy does not fulfill any of these requirements.

The story itself is told fairly well, and moves along with vocabulary and pacing that are easy to understand and follow. The back matter of the book, which is 13 pages long, consists of an overview of the traditional, pre-contact culture of the Makah with a historical timeline and glossary. The photos of both people and artifacts, mostly from museum collections, are utilized to augment the (mostly material) cultural attributes found throughout the book.

Unfortunately, the author fails to attribute her source for this story and falls into a rather unflattering place in the rubric provided by Betsy Hearne in her articles. In the articles by Hearne, she creates a *source note countdown* for authors from 1-5, with 1 being the best and 5 the worst. For *Clamshell Boy*, the authors' lack of source notes, but inclusion of some background information on the culture, gives her a rating of 4; this is identified as the "background as source note" on the scale is second to the worst rating of 5. For this score she identifies how it is

"Better than nothing but still close to useless, this note gives some general information on the culture from which a picture-book folktale is drawn. It's important to know about traditions, but that's a background note, not a source note. In some ways, it's worse than no note at all because it's deceptive. It looks like a source note, so we let it slide by. Some notes (variation 4A) even manage to tell the *history* of a tale but avoid citing the book or books from which the tale was adapted." (Hearne, *Cite the Source* 4)

Again, this book already falls short in two areas; to revisit the art in the story, we should take a look at what Hearne calls "artistic fakelore", and how, as Bill Reid pointed out in *Solitary*

Raven, this does a tremendous disservice to the story. What is objectionable about this practice is “not the creation of new art to accompany an adaptation, but the use of folk art motifs misappropriated from a culture or misapplied from one culture to another.” (*Respect the Source*, Hearne 4) and further “When artists try to imitate a "naive" or "primitive" style, stiffly elaborated with designs that may be drawn from pottery or ritual objects, the result is often art that's neither authentically crafted nor freely imaginative.” (*Respect the Source*, Hearne 4)

For the indigenous people of the Northwest Coast, the art form is not unlike European crest art, and to depict it in an inaccurate or haphazard manner is to disrespect not only the culture, but the ancestors that are depicted in the art.

What was especially strange was that the author made a concerted effort to cite *all of the photo sources* for the book, but failed to mention the sources of the story itself! The ethnographic and cultural errors in this title, not to mention the lack of source citation, make this a highly questionable translation of the story of Clamshell Boy. What is especially disconcerting is that this author, in fact, wrote the entire *Native American Legends* series for the publisher.

The Wave of the Sea-wolf by David Wisniewski

This title, part of a series of “Multi-Cultural” children’s stories by David Wisniewski, tells the story of Kchokeen, a Tlingit girl and her people, as they survive the wrath of the supernatural sea monster Kay-Lituya. It also tells the true story, in abridged form, of the first Tlingit encounter with the French explorer la Perouse.

As with all of the books in the series, the pictures are executed in an exquisite, amazingly detailed paper cut-out medium. The amount of hours of labor needed to construct the pictures must have been both daunting. Unlike the previous book, the depiction of the “Northern” (Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian) Northwest Coast art form is executed in a much more culturally and ethnographically accurate fashion. Given the limitations of utilizing cut paper as a medium, the traditional designs are remarkably crisp and clean, one of the defining attributes of the art form on the north coast.

In this story, the Chiefs and aristocrats wear regalia that is fitting of their social/ceremonial status, and there is no sense of the costuming, backgrounds, or props (canoes, etc.) being “forced” to fit a pre-conceived notion of what these people and places should look like. It is obvious that the author did quite a bit more research into his subject, and in the areas of visual representation, it certainly shows.

This titles success in the arenas of historical accuracy and source notes are a bit more problematic. Again, as in the first title this author would have to receive a 4 in the *source note countdown*, as, like the previous author he has background notes, but no source attribution. The author does state in the background notes that he purposely mixed and matched several traditional Tlingit stories and factual historical events. While his honesty is appreciated, it is hard to separate where one story or historical incident begins and another one ends. For someone without some background in Tlingit or Northwest Coast history and culture, this would become very confusing if they tried to pursue additional background information on these subjects.

For example, while the story about the Tlingit encounter with la Perouse in Lityua Bay is a historical event, the bombing of the village later in the book, and the complete destruction of the French vessels are inaccurate. The bombing of the village is based upon another incident in which the Tlingit village of Angoon was bombed by the U.S. Navy in 1882 and while la Perouse did lose 21 crewmen to the sea in Lituya Bay in 1786, all of the sailing ships and most of the crews were not lost in the bay.

Another interesting facet of the story is how the author made a conscious decision to change the name of the sea monster from whatever traditional sources he was utilizing to craft his version. He states very clearly in the back matter that he changed the name of the creature from Gonakadeit to Kay-Lituya on purpose. His reasoning had more to do with context than cultural accuracy, but from a traditional Tlingit perspective, this makes sense. Gonakadeit, besides being a jealously guarded clan crest and spirit ancestor amongst several Tlingit Clans, is also more of a bringer of luck and fortune than a destructive force. What the author did was to merge several sea monster beings in Tlingit and Haida folklore to create a creature that fit the context of the storytelling.

While it could be hard to defend all of these practices in the translation of this story, the author, in this case finds an interesting way of making it work. Betsy Hearne pointed out that when it comes to authority in cross-cultural storytelling other factors and skill sets can come into play to make the story a successful in its translation/transference:

“Certainly, authority includes the power of imagination and that illusive quality, perception. Some storytellers and artists seem to manage quantum leaps from one

culture to another without violating either. Underlying their apparent ease, however, is usually a great deal of skill based on understated knowledge and underrated experience. The success of all storytelling—in any medium, time, or tradition—depends on a blend of creativity and craft. To that extent, admittedly, it's the quality of art and narrative that determines how well a tale translates from a culture's oral tradition into a contemporary picture book.” (*Respect the Source*, Hearne 3)

David Wisniewski has shown with this title that he does possess the knowledge and experience needed to “bend the rules” and still offer up a successful and entertaining cross-cultural book.²

Frog Girl by Paul Owen Lewis

Frog Girl is the second Northwest Coast themed offering of Washington State artist and writer Paul Owen Lewis. The story recounts the tale of a young girl’s journey to the village of the Frog People and how, she and her village learn the importance of respecting and honoring all of their non-human relatives.

One facet of this book that sets it apart from the previous two titles is that the author, Paul Lewis is a trained Northwest Coast artist. Although non-native, he learned the art from a cadre

² It is worth noting that this author’s family has a direct personal and cultural attachment to Lituya Bay. In the early 1900’s my great-grandmother was in Lituya Bay as a baby with her family on a food gathering expedition. A tidal wave hit the bay and she and several members of her family survived the incident, although many people also died. This has become a part of our family’s lore and is another in a long line of stories about the monster in Lituya Bay.

of well known Northwest Coast artists in the Seattle area and has also participated in a variety of the cultural activities of native friends in the region.

His mastery of the art-form is apparent in the beautifully rendered illustrations in both this book and the first Northwest Coast title he wrote, *Storm Boy*. His attention to detail and cultural accuracy in the regalia, dwellings, utilitarian objects, canoes, and totemic art is unrivalled by most titles dealing with this subject matter currently on the market. Lewis shows the respect he has for the cultures he represents by the obvious love and care he puts into their visual depiction.

As with the previous two books, this book would also get a 4 in the *source note countdown*; again, there is ample background material but no source notes. Like Wisniewski, this author very clearly states that this story is composed of “elements” from several Native stories. He also names several native “cultural consultants” (not unlike Anthropologists) that he utilized for the book and explores the story elements utilizing Joseph Campbell’s rite of passage “motif” rubric; separation, initiation, and return.

One section of the background information was especially interesting; Lewis explores the concept of clan crest ownership and acquisition in such a way that he fills in an important cultural component for how the stories are presented:

“The girl has returned from her adventure bearing the frog crest button blanket, a token and proof of her adoption by the frog people. Because of this, she can now rightfully claim the frog crest as her own to display and pass down to her descendents.” (Lewis 30)

With this one paragraph, Lewis highlights one of the most important defining attributes of Northwest Coast cultures; he immediately follows this paragraph with the one mentioned

earlier about combining multiple story elements and who his consultants were. This is very important, and the way the author went about addressing this issue is ingenious.

By utilizing his own version of a frog design and by steering clear of a clan-specific story pulled directly from Anthropological literature, Lewis creatively sidesteps and at the same time addresses several of the most contentious issues usually involved in the transmittal of traditional Northwest Coast storytelling: attribution and permission. In traditional Northwest Coast cultures, clan stories could only be used with explicit permission from the clan. By “blurring the boundaries” between several stories without compromising cultural integrity, he shows that he has a firm understanding of the traditional cultural protocols governing these stories and designs. This is a common dilemma facing contemporary Northwest Coast visual artists, both native and non-native, who, like the author have found ways of expressing the beauty of the cultures without offending or breaching cultural protocols and beliefs.

This title, of the three, is the best example of the kind of story translation/transference Betsy Hearne described as being a combination of *balancing* the old and new with being responsible and receptive:

“Folktales belong to all of us, but we do not own them. Like the air we breathe and the earth we stand on, they are ours to take care of for a short while. The more we give to them, the more we find in them. In recreating a folktale for children in picture-book form, we are borrowing an old story, adding to it, and returning it to the world renewed. That is the ideal scenario, but sometimes more is subtracted from the story than is added.

Achieving a balance between old and new depends on equal respect for *both* old and new, for what we've received and what we have to give, for the "original" source of a story (i.e., where we heard or read it) and for the possibilities of re-creating it. If for no other reason, we should respect a story's past because we shall soon become part of it.

"(Respect the Source, Hearne 1)

This last title, while not specifically citing sources, does find a way to achieve the balance that Hearne describes above. Dealing with the culturally specific ideas of ownership in this region means finding new and creative ways of being able to tell the stories while at the same time "respecting the source"; in this case "the source" being the ancient cultures and modern peoples themselves.

Conclusion: Quoth the Raven, "Where's the Beef?"

After examining these three titles, it becomes apparent, even after applying Hearne's rubrics and what are considered "traditional" native values that the assessment of how successful these translations are is much more complicated than it seems at first glance. Beginning with Bill Reid's initial criticism of Anthropological texts, which often serve as the sources for these stories, the issue instantly becomes complex and multi-faceted:

"One obvious root of the ownership problem is the fact that early "collectors"—folklorists, anthropologists, or writers—were usually men from a colonizing power with a history of oppressing the culture being studied.

Adding insult to injury is the further fact that the culture may be subject to continued social, economic, and political oppression, so that cultural "raiding" sets off historical suspicion if not rage. While some people have now begun to recognize—largely because of Native American protests—the ethical questions attendant to desecrating graves, selling holy objects to art collectors, and displaying ancestral bones in a museum, the spoken word is more elusive." (*Swapping Stories*, Hearne 513)

As a counterpoint to this painful legacy, Hearne continues:

“Challenging this position is the fact that without collectors, however controversial their methods, motivations, or presentations, much great culture would be lost. Without Joel Chandler Harris, for example, we would not have such a large canon of Brer Rabbit stories despite the fact that a few would survive for collection in the twentieth century. Without Henry Schoolcraft, we would have far less knowledge of Native American lore, although, again, some of that lore obviously continues and grows. Without the children's books based on work such as these men's', fewer people, young or old, would be aware of the rich heritage that African American and northern Native American cultures bring to U.S. culture. However, "collectors'" versions of the tales were filtered through attitudes foreign to the tellers, a fact of which we are perhaps more aware now than then. Like folktales themselves, the study of folklore has changed constantly and traveled far.” (*Swapping Stories*, Hearne 513)

Indeed, the “colonial dynamic” has always been one in which the colonial power *destroys cultures with one hand while “saving” them with the other*. As strange as this may seem, it is a

cycle that was repeated over and over, not only in the America's but in Africa, Asia, and Oceania as well. Whatever the historical issues, we are all aware of the oft repeated mantra that "you cannot turn back time". This being the case, we can and should focus on the last few sentences of the quote above. Hearne points out that stories were/are "filtered" through the cultural and social attitudes of the "collectors" and as such, could be altered, or in the worst cases, deformed beyond recognition.

To avoid these potential pitfalls and challenges, it requires an amazing effort on the part of authors and illustrators to translate and transfer these tales into new and uncharted media and mediums. This is no easy feat, and what was surprising and refreshing about examining the three titles above was the "trickster shift" utilized by at least two of the authors that would have made that quintessential trickster of the Northwest Coast, the raven, proud.

To do this, we must first suspend one widely held belief about "respecting the source" of the stories. Many people would assume that by altering a story or any other work of art for that matter, we are in fact, "ruining" it. Using a bit of the Ravens magic, we can, and should look at this from another point of view. Ironically enough, by altering the stories, the authors are in fact *showing the respect* they have for the cultural values of the people and cultures they depict. In the Northwest Coast cultural context, this makes perfect sense; to leave the stories in their original form, the authors would be breaching protocols that are still very much a part of many native communities cultural matrix. They have found a way to share these fantastic tales with the world in such a way that they can also continue to defer to the underlying cultural values of the people amongst whom the stories and visual arts originated. As Hearne points out

“The only way to reconcile the differences between conflicting needs of borrowing and owning stories is to try and realize the benefit of both. Every story *has* a story that enriches the telling of it and therefore enriches the teller. The knowledge of a story's history is not so much a burden as it is a matter of self-interest. Here, self-interest dictates a process of swapping rather than stealing, and swapping has certain ground rules. We can cheat to gain temporary advantage, but ultimately the more we bring to the swap, the richer we become. Long-range swapping depends on a relationship of mutual advantage. Moreover, good bargaining depends on knowledge of the wares, especially if they're antiques. The more knowledge we bring to a story *and its history*, the more we get as tellers and listeners. This kind of swap can help satisfy the requirements of both cultural responsibility and artistic freedom and, in doing so, can help ease (though never erase) tension between the ethics and aesthetics of folklore in children's literature.” (*Swapping Tales*, Hearne 526)

The indigenous societies of the Northwest Coast were known as master trading societies, and the trade networks spanning the coast and into the interior mainland for thousands of miles are the stuff of legend. The concept of “swapping” one thing for another, to the benefit of both parties is something the ancients from this region would understand instantly. Here, Hearne has brought into crystal clear focus another way of looking at how some authors have been successful in sharing the stories, visual arts, and magic of these ancient societies with all.

Learning from all of the human beings involved in this continually evolving process and dialogue, let's continue to re-open and utilize the modern trade-networks in such a way that we can all continue to benefit from learning and sharing with one another.

Haida Artist/Elder Bill Reid, in describing the joy and wonder he felt when first coming across ancient Haida petroglyphs on the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia notices how “little men, painfully pecking away day after day, sometimes week after week, at pieces of stone, could hold such powerful visions that their final realizations transcend them and their time, become independent of their creators, come to possess an existences separate from those who made them, and separate from us who come after.” (Reid 16)

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