Myth and Memory





Edited by John Sutton Lutz

Myth and Memory: Stories of Indigenous-European Contact

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Contents

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Thank you all!
John Sutton Lutz





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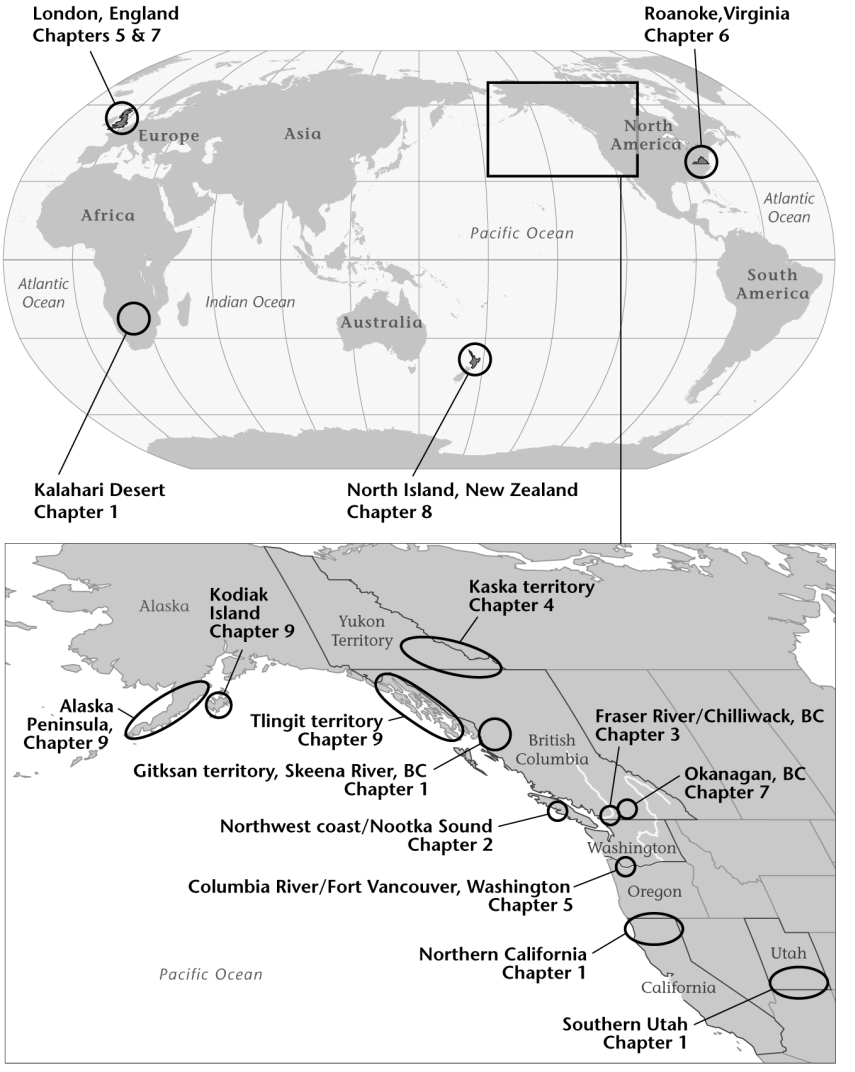

Map 1 Locations discussed in the book

Introduction: Myth Understandings; or First Contact, Over and Over Again

John Sutton Lutz

First contact.

The words leap off the page into the imagination. Between who? What happened? How do we know what happened?

Whether we are thinking science fiction or historic encounters, such as Columbus and the "Indians," James Cook and the Hawaiians, or Martin Frobisher and the Baffin Island Inuit, the questions are the same, the curiosity intense. The moment of contact between two peoples, two alien societies, marks the opening of an epoch and the joining of histories. What if it had happened differently? Would our world be different today? From our distance, the historic moment of contact seems so pregnant with possibilities, so full of hope and fear, and often, so laden with disappointment for what might have been.

But contact stories are not just about the past and the "might have been." Contact stories grab our attention because they also explain how things are now, and they contain a key to how they might be. For settler peoples, they are origin stories, the explanation of how the immigrants got "here," and they are the opening paragraph of a long rationale for displacing indigenous peoples. For indigenous peoples, they are a prologue to the process in which their world was turned upside down. For both, the stories are the opening act in a play that is still unfolding. Is it a story of progress or one of dislocation? Is it about bringing the gifts of civilization or robbing the wealth of the land? Depending on one's viewpoint, the plot of the play and the blocking of the performance vary dramatically. Each needs its own opening scene.

All over the world, settler populations and indigenous peoples are engaged in negotiations regarding legitimacy, power, and rights. In New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, this takes the form of litigation and negotiations concerning treaty and Aboriginal rights. In the United States, it is manifest in a struggle over cultural property, archaeological sites, and human remains. At root, these are all struggles over what is an accurate recounting of what

happened – about history – about what we believe. The stakes are huge. The legitimacy of the settler nations and indigenous claims to be the rightful owners or caretakers of the land and resources are based on these contact stories.

Comparing indigenous and explorer accounts of the same meetings brings the collision of fundamentally different systems of thought into sharp relief. Europeans and indigenous people had (and in some cases, still have) incommensurable beliefs about what motivated behaviour, about fate, about trade, about reality. The juxtaposition of multiple systems of knowing challenges our culturally specific meanings of event, of time, of place, of narrative, and of history itself. Immediately, we are asked to evaluate written versus oral traditions and then, even more challenging, to decide between explanations based on different notions of what is real and what is imaginary.

First contact *and* the imaginary are, it turns out, closely linked. When we look for that moment of "First Contact" in historical encounters, that moment when two peoples stumbled upon each other unexpectedly – when two cultures were caught off-guard by the novelty and strangeness of "the other" – it retreats into the imagination. What we find instead is that Europeans did not discover the unexpected. They went into new territories full of expectations, ideas, and stereotypes: what they found was – in large measure – what they expected to find. It was not the "new" that they encountered so much as what the popular myths of the day suggested they would find. Christopher Columbus found "the Indies" and Indians; Jacques Cartier found the rapids that marked the entrance to "La Chine" – China. Martin Frobisher, who found "gold" on Baffin Island, was one of many whose gold, when smelted, was no more than dross.[1]

We often think of Christopher Columbus' 1492 landfall as the "real first, first encounter." Yet we know that the Norse had been to North America in the years around 1000 and that European fishermen had been fishing the Grand Banks off northeast America for a long time before Columbus. But even if Columbus had no knowledge of his predecessors, his encounter was the product of expectations conditioned by imaginary worlds conjured up long before his arrival. Columbian scholar Peter Hulme argues that, rather than strictly reporting what he saw, Columbus produced a "compendium of European fantasies about the orient." Hulme shows that the descriptions in Columbus' text are grounded in the European discourses of "Orientalism" and the savagery of "the other," which Columbus drew from his reading of Marco Polo and the classical writers Pliny, Homer, and Herodotus.[2] The classical accounts, which passed for factual knowledge in their time, of monsters and cannibals, formed the foundation for Columbus' descriptions of the "West Indies." Recent work on Marco Polo shows that his eyewitness accounts were ghostwritten and were probably fables derived from other jailed travellers.[3] Columbus' account, imbued with all these mythological

associations, is now studied as a factual record of the contact moment. So, the first, "first contact story" is also, in Hulme's words, "the first fable of European beginnings in America."[4]

The inability to see the new world with fresh eyes is also evident from the illustrations that were attached to Columbus' writings and those that followed him. In the engravings, the people, the flora and fauna and geography, all look European. The visual references are to the classical era of the ancient Greeks rather than the new "Americans."[5] Europeans did not see their "new worlds" with fresh eyes; they saw them through the lenses of their ancient stories.

Nor was the experience any more novel to the peoples of the Americas or the South Seas. For the indigenous people, whose old worlds became new to Europeans, even the very first of the documented voyages were not their first encounters with strangers. Five hundred years before Columbus, northern Europeans – Vikings – had built one and probably more settlements on the eastern shores of America. Possibly, other undocumented strangers had come from the east. Almost certainly, indigenous Americans had intermittent visitors from the west.[6]

Yet even these visitors were not new, for the indigenous peoples of the Americas and the Antipodes had extensive experience with visitors from a spirit world, the place from which they imagined many of the early Europeans had come. Moreover, many had prophets who had foretold the arrival of these unusual visitors. Rather than being something new, these strangers were usually seen as something old – the dead returned, ancient people or spirits revisiting.[7] Like the Europeans, indigenous people drew their new encounters from, and into, their old mythologies.

So, for both parties, there was always an element to first contact that was not new contact. It was a performance pantomimed on the beaches, riverbanks, or decks around the globe, following ancient scripts as each side drew the other into its own imaginative world.

To call first contact an "event," then, is partially misleading, for several reasons. Although, using European records, we can date many encounters to a chronological moment, the meaning of that moment depended on the long sweep of the centuries-old stories that the participants brought with them. And very clearly, from the earliest encounters, stories spread among European seafarers and throughout Europe so that subsequent voyagers already "knew" what to expect. The latter-day voyagers sailed with the stories of Columbus and his successors as cargo, setting the stage for the next series of first encounters, over and over again. Similarly, the stories travelled vast distances along the coast and inland among indigenous peoples. As Europeans moved along the coasts, or up rivers, and as indigenous people ventured down, there were succeeding sets of first encounters; each, in some measure, being a product of the last.

Oral narratives will often unsettle the European notion that an event is a discrete and bounded incident. Indigenous people may frame the event differently with different causality and temporality, and oral narratives sometimes consider a series of related happenings (in terms of their world view) in a single story.[8]

Instead of thinking of a "first contact" as an event, Mary Louise Pratt offers the more useful idea of a "contact zone." We can think of the contact zone as, first, a space across which one could map a moving wave of first contacts, and second, as a temporal zone – an extended period over which the encounters happened. We could also expand the notion to include the zone of discourse where stories of first contact play out.[9]

Temporally, we can often clock the opening of various contact zones. But when did they close? If a contact zone is a period in which two cultures were meeting each other for the first time, in the Americas this may span the period from the Viking encounter around 1000, or if you prefer, the Columbian encounter of 1492, into the mid-twentieth century when all the Arctic and Amazonian peoples had finally met Europeans. If we think of the contact zone as the period in which two cultures are still struggling to figure each other out, a zone in which miscommunication and conflicting mythologies govern interrelationships as much as shared understandings, these zones lasted even longer. The chapters in this book argue that we are still in that contact zone.

Not only are settler populations and indigenous people still meeting in zones of mutual incomprehension, a case ably made by J. Edward Chamberlin's lead chapter, they are also still creating and telling new contact stories and challenging the old ones, as the chapters by Keith Thor Carlson, Patrick Moore, I.S. MacLaren, Michael Harkin, Wendy Wickwire, and Judith Binney, all demonstrate.

This book takes a critical look at how contact stories have been and are being told and used. Although a few anthologies of contact stories do exist, as do some excellent examinations of historical encounters informed by contact stories, few scholars have examined first-contact stories as a genre or an ongoing "contact zone." In the 1940s, R.G. Collingwood wrote that each generation of historians rewrites history in the light of the concerns of the day.[10] Today, what is most important to a new generation and a much more inclusive range of storytellers is the contact narratives themselves, and the currency these stories have.

Natalie Zemon Davis identified four strategies that the current generation of scholars is using to move the European from the centre of contact stories. First, they describe the "gaze," revealing European attitudes and images of non-European peoples as "projections of anxieties" or elaborations of European categories. Second, they privilege both indigenous people and

Europeans as actors and reactors, primarily in terms of resistance and domination. Third, they examine what Richard White has called "the middle ground," a space of shared and contested meaning focused around exchange and mixture. Fourth, they look at cultures in contact with each other in "terms of absolute simultaneity, radical contemporaneity ... seeking signs of the common human experience" but "insisting at the same time on the existence of strong and concrete cultural difference and the importance of divergent context." The chapters in this volume draw particularly on the last three strategies but offer another possibility: identifying the mythology and the history embedded in stories that emerge from both indigenous and European contact accounts, treating both as equally credible and incredible. Several chapters in this volume develop yet another strategy: focusing primarily on how indigenous people have recorded, verified, and used contact stories within their own oral and written literatures.[11]

This book stems from a meeting of ten diverse scholars, a mix of historians, anthropologists, linguists, and literary scholars. It is an attempt to bring them into a dialogue with each other as well as the stories, and to create a critical mass of commentary.[12] The scope is international: the narratives come from New Zealand, the eastern and western seaboards of the United States, subarctic Canada, and the Kalahari. As a reflection of the active scholarship in the area, several examine the northeast Pacific. Each focuses on a particular time and place, and all contemplate the larger issues raised by first encounters. Four themes run through the book, each an avenue to understanding the contact zone: currency, performance, ambiguity, and power.

Currency

In Chapter 1, J. Edward (Ted) Chamberlin invites us to think about the notion of "currency." Currency speaks of time and of belief. As he says, "currency," the kind minted and printed by governments, has value only if people believe in it. Like the coin of the realm, stories have currency only if people believe in them. Chamberlin highlights *the* key question, because all the chapters in the book ask us to re-examine what we believe, and why we believe some stories and not others. Several of the chapters here focus on this kind of currency, the question of belief.

In Chapter 2, John Sutton Lutz develops this line of inquiry by examining both the contact events and the ensuing stories. He contrasts the so-called realist tales told by the settler societies with the myth-linked stories that have been passed down or have arrived in a dream to the current generation of indigenous people in the northeast Pacific. Contact narratives are all about belief, and Lutz argues that the "rational European stories" that pass for realist accounts are in fact as rooted in a European mythology as others are in an indigenous "myth world."

One of the great reservations about engaging indigenous contact accounts is their connection to the world of storytelling. In an oral culture, can one tell truth from fiction, and if so, how? In Chapter 3, Keith Thor Carlson looks at the importation of contact stories and other oral histories into the contemporary world of the courts, and considers the dilemma of two competing oral histories. We have established criteria with which to evaluate competing texts written in a Western tradition, but we are ill-equipped to evaluate indigenous stories. Through a decade of research with the Stó:lō (pronounced Stah-lo) First Nation near Vancouver, Canada, Carlson describes the Stó:lō criteria for accepting or rejecting oral histories. When they want to use the courts or the court of public opinion, how should the different oral accounts be judged as more or less true?

Carlson's chapter identifies Stó:lō tests for historical accuracy. These are not based on probability or corroborating evidence in the sense that most non-indigenous historians or courts would use. For the Stó:lō, the corroborating evidence is the reputation of the storyteller and the genealogy of the story as traced through previous narrators. The cultural and physical risks of mistelling an account are high among the Stó:lō, and this has served to preserve the culturally relevant information in stories over long time spans. Both Carlson and Wendy Wickwire, in Chapter 7, point out that in the indigenous traditions they study, there is no notion of fiction. Like scholarly writing, these oral cultures have clear rules that govern where embellishment is allowed and where it is not.

Wendy Wickwire's chapter also focuses on the question of belief. Her chapter maps out the historiography of Harry Robinson, a brilliant indigenous historian from the Okanagan Nation in British Columbia, with whom she worked for over a decade. After his death, she returned to those of his stories that she had set aside as not fitting into the ethnographic mode. They offer an indigenous exploration of why white colonists are dominant (they have no regard for the truth), a validation of an indigenous world view, and a prophecy for a more balanced future relationship. In presenting them, Wickwire asks us to reinterpret Boasian anthropology and to reconsider the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous views of our own history.

Stories have another kind of "currency" in the sense that they are all of our time. When we retell, or even reread contact accounts, we bring them into our time and place. The very act of bringing them to us transports us into the contact zone. As E.H. Carr noted a long time ago, "History is not the past: it is the consciousness of the past used for present purposes." The stakes tied up in contact stories are very much about today.[13] As historians and the courts have moved toward understanding and giving more credibility to oral narratives, the question of how we deal with conflicting stories within the oral tradition becomes more urgent. Wickwire, Chamberlin,

and Carlson all raise the issue of whether we can develop the listening skills to evaluate them.

In Chapter 4, Patrick Moore invites us to take a closer look at how indigenous people, in this case the Kaska of the Subarctic, classify stories. He finds that linguistic clues separate "true" historical narratives from those that are told more to entertain or poke fun. Moore notes how place and time (what Mikhail Bakhtin called "chronotope") are characterized differently in the different genres of stories. From his chapter, we discover the range of acceptable renderings of the past in a Kaska world view.[14]

European contact performances fall into a range of genres, from the scientific to the epic, from the novel to the comic book. Both Carlson and Moore point out that indigenous traditions also have their range of genres. Moore develops in a Kaska context the notion suggested by Lutz that, in interpreting novel experiences, each culture has access to certain cultural forms only. Moore, and Judith Binney in Chapter 8, focuses on intertextuality – the relationship of stories or texts to each other. Moore finds that several contact stories relating the novel appearances of Europeans are transposed onto long-standing vision quest narratives or pre-existing formulas for humorous stories. He also draws our attention to the different understanding and importance of time in indigenous and immigrant stories. So, stories also have another kind of currency: they flow over time and across space. How they flow is through the magic of performance.

Performance

Something was always exchanged on first contact. Often the exchange included goods, but it always involved attempts at communication, usually very deliberately contrived. Even indigenous people, who often had less time to prepare for the encounters, were quick to assemble their chiefs or ceremonial speakers, don their regalia, and marshal their symbols of wealth and power. Both sides to the encounter had much at stake: trying to suggest that they were powerful though not threatening, and interested in exchange though not to be bested.

Typically, the parties would speak to each other without any comprehension; then they would turn to gesture. Often the contact events themselves were elaborately staged, intensely theatrical, performances. The performances were pantomimed, they were sung and danced, they were spoken, and they were enacted. Symbols such as flags and masks, uniforms and effigies were invoked and exchanged. As Stephen Greenblatt observed, these first meetings were "very often contact between representatives bearing representations."[15]

Not only were the first-contact events themselves performances, a focus of the Lutz chapter, but the retellings of these stories are also performances. Indigenous historical performance has given priority to the spoken form, to

song, dance, and art. Although some groups, such as the Aztecs, have been writing their history for centuries, most adopted writing as a mode of performance in the last century. Wendy Wickwire, Keith Thor Carlson, Patrick Moore, and Judith Binney all stress the performative aspect of indigenous storytelling in their chapters.

Storytellers in the modern European tradition wrote down their narratives. We have been accustomed to treating these exploration accounts as first-hand eyewitness reports, and we often accord them more weight than the mediated stories told by oral transmission. The "I/eye was there" nature of these accounts is what accords them so much credibility. Yet, in Chapter 5, I.S. MacLaren probes one of these "I saw" European stories, a well-known record by the famous "Indian painter" Paul Kane, and points out that neither Kane nor most of the explorers upon whom we rely actually wrote the texts published under their names. Moreover, some of the Kane material was borrowed from other writers, and some was exaggerated or fabricated to place Kane near or at the centre of events. This and MacLaren's other published work cast exploration narratives – so-called realistic accounts – as performances for an audience, often written by a team of creators.[16]

For our great public events, we turn these narratives over to playwrights, musicians, poets, and screenwriters, who rewrite them yet again, so we can perform our history in pageants, grand commemorative occasions such as the American bicentennial, Olympic opening ceremonies, or the opening of parliaments, or in religious events such as Easter services. We sing them in our national anthems and our pop music; we dance them in our ballets as well as in street rap. We also perform them, in plays, in poems, in historical novels, and in academic monographs; we perform them in art and we print them on our currency. We perform for ourselves and we perform for the others as a way of creating and solidifying our individual and collective identities.[17]

The "arrival story of Europeans" in the Arctic or the Pacific, the founding of this state or that city, which we find in history books, travel guides, poems, plays, and songs, are good examples. In Chapter 6, Michael Harkin focuses specifically on how one contact event, the establishment and disappearance of the Roanoke Colony on the eastern seaboard of the United States, has been shaped and reshaped to give legitimacy to the settler population. These storytelling performances self-consciously retell the encounter, compressing and sometimes re-ordering timelines, shifting or conflating places, and transposing people – in effect, telescoping time and space into a poetic unity. They are, in Chamberlin's words "ceremonies of belief" as well as "chronicles of events." These are the so-called charter myths that nations, as well as ethnic and social groups use to justify their presence, their occupation of land, their denial of inheritance, and their rights to dispossess

and oppress others who, they would claim, have a less legitimate story. Harkin's chapter shows how even a colony that disappeared without a trace can be used to legitimate a subsequent settler population.

Obviously, performance requires artifice. By definition, it cannot be true, since it is meant to be a representation, yet its power rests in its ability to make us believe. Performance is the creation of meaning, recreating and referring to events that are now distant. To invoke the past, we must resort to art. In theatre, the invocation is achieved through costumes and set. In text, it comes through descriptive re-creations, by speaking in the voice of a witness from the past, or in appropriating another language. The intent of this is not simply to deceive, as Chamberlin reminds us, but to deceive to tell the truth. We are all familiar with the notion that fiction can sometimes be truer than a recitation of facts. This preference goes back at least to Aristotle, who favoured poetry over history because the former was the "vehicle of universal and essential truths" whereas the latter "merely trafficked in the contingent, specific, unique, superficial facts."[18] Performances always leave room for ambiguity.

Ambiguity

The most piquant of ethnographic moments are those of first contact, as Greg Dening writes in his book *Performances,* because of their "extravagant ambiguity." Each side was left to guess what message the other was trying to convey. Each side continually revised its attempt to communicate, looking for signs of recognition from the other. These were "real" ethnographic moments in the sense that each side was looking for cross-cultural clues about meaning and motivation, though often through very narrow lenses. Of course, misunderstanding was communicated as often as was meaning. Sometimes these could cause offence, but so often, the extravagant ambiguity of the moment allowed each side to make what it pleased of the messages coming from the other.[19]

Inevitably, communication means translation. Even gesture and gesticulation require translation, as travellers well know. Anyone who has waved "bye-bye" in China, only to have the departing party return, or who, in a South American country, has tried to signal affirmation by making the North American "OK" sign (bringing the thumb and forefinger together) will have experienced the cultural specificity of gesture.

Also inevitably, there is some exchange of language; and over time, specialized interpreters of language begin to mediate and funnel the exchange. Often, as Richard Dauenhauer and Nora Marks Dauenhauer suggest in Chapter 9, translators were people already "in between." Some were captives on one side or the other, others were the offspring of sexual contacts that so rapidly became part of the wider intercourse. It might seem that the presence

of translators, especially as they gained fluency in each language, would reduce the ambiguity. In writing of the archetypical translator, Cortes' Doña Marina, Stephen Greenblatt remarks that language is the companion of empire. Of course, to some extent he is right, but the translators also have their own part to play in creating spaces of misunderstanding and undermining the European project.[20]

Translators became the bottleneck though which communication between whole societies began to flow; as a result, a single person often had enormous influence on the outcome of contact encounters. The translator was always, by definition, something of a hybrid. Translators, as Lewis Hyde notes, may earn their pay from one side or another, but some of that pay always comes from existing in the "in-between." The translators always had an agenda of their own, and this filter, or perhaps more accurately, this muddiness injected into the process, was part and parcel of the contact encounters. Hyde points to an old Italian pun – "'traduttore, traditore/translator, traitor' to remind us that the translator who connects two people always stands between them."[21]

The Dauenhauers' chapter is unique in the North American context and rare elsewhere. Its focus is the translators themselves, three men who connected Russia to the Tlingit inhabitants of America for over thirty years of the contact zone. One, a hostage rescued from the Tlingit, had a Russian father and a Tlingit mother; the other two, Tlingit themselves, were captured as boys by the Russians. Their hybrid identities meant that both sides, Tlingit and Russian, would ask the same questions regarding them: Where does their loyalty lie? Should we believe them? How should we interpret what they say?

The issues of translation and ambivalence are still with us now in the contact zone. When we deal with indigenous accounts, and even with many of the European accounts, we do so through translations from one language to our own. But even texts originally written in our own language can need translation from their time to ours. Over many lifetimes, words come and go from circulation, their meanings shift, and the references that were once common knowledge become obscure. We perform the role of translators when we enter the contact zone. As the chapters in this book show us, translators are transformers, transforming not only words but ideas and even whole cosmologies into something that "makes sense" to us. In Western and many indigenous mythologies, this kind of linguistic transformation has been seen as the work of the Trickster, since misunderstanding is so often injected. As Hyde says, "Translation from one language to another is Eshu-work, Legba-work, Hermes-neutics," and we may add, Coyote- and Raven-work. When we translate, we perform the Trickster/Transformer's work.

The Trickster figures prominently in most non-Christian traditions. In the Pacific Northwest, the Nuxalk people tell us that the Creator thought one language would be enough for all peoples, but Raven, the Trickster, made many languages, to have more sport in the spaces of misunderstanding.[22] The chapters by Wickwire, Chamberlin, and Lutz engage the role of tricksters in contact encounters.

If extravagant ambiguity was present at the first encounter, it has only grown with each retelling of the stories: "Native and Stranger each possessed the other in their interpretations of the other. They possessed one another in an ethnographic moment that was transcribed into text and symbol ... They entertained themselves with their histories of their encounter."[23]

In Chapter 6, Harkin looks at how the story of the "Lost Colony of Roanoke" has become entertainment and symbol, at how the ambiguity has been stretched to engage settler audiences while it tells them a story that they need to hear. In Chapter 1, Chamberlin very much focuses on "how the uncertainties of representation (whether something is there or not) and of communication (whether we believe the teller or the tale) generate the very certainties to which we give assent" in the oral and written texts of religion, law, science, and the arts.

In Chapter 8, Judith Binney focuses on how Ngai Tuhoe and Ngati Whare, two Maori tribes living on New Zealand's North Island, interpreted their encounters with Europeans through their own historical/prophetic ideas of "shelter." One narrative tells of the "mythical" white *kawau* (cormorant); others draw on biblical constructs. She shows how these narratives are continually redeployed to suit new situations. She calls this kind of history, which interweaves Maori narrative forms (including prophecies and story frameworks from mythologies) with those heard, and often read, about Maori and European cultures (the Bible, anthropological accounts, white histories), "plereomatic history."

Plereomatic history is easily recognizable in oral history, but the concept applies to European contact stories as well, where it is sometimes called "intertextuality." When Columbus left Europe with the writings of Pliny and Marco Polo as cargo, or when James Cook sailed the South Pacific with Francis Drake in his library and other accounts partially remembered in his head, each produced contact stories that were plereomatic. Within Columbus' "first-hand" inscriptions were European mythological patterns and stories read at second hand. In the same vein, the works that Harkin discusses are plereomatic. These histories of Roanoke interweave myth-forms, eyewitness recollections, and second-hand interpretations.

The notion that all contact narratives are a mix of eyewitness observations and remembered prior accounts and myth-forms helps us understand why, even in the verbatim records of the European explorers, we can find

ambivalence. The ambivalence is the space between what they saw and what their cultures permitted them to see. In the hybridity of the text, as Homi Bhabha has argued, we can also seek a reflection of the indigenous voice. In the cracks in the European logic within these texts is the space of the "out-of-power language." Here there is also a recognition that, even as Europe imposed its own stereotypes and myths on the "native," a dialogue was going on.[24] As the European world begins to alter the indigenous, something, including fragments of the indigenous myth-world, is being transmitted to Europe, becomes reinterpreted, and starts to act on the Europeans.[25]

Power

The ambiguity in the performance of contact stories opens a gap in which one can sometimes discern what lies at their heart: the workings of power within and between cultural groups. This is true from several aspects. At a literal level, it is evident when we think of the balance of power in those contact moments the accounts describe. On one hand, as Harkin shows, the story of Roanoke is told to suggest the longevity and legitimacy of European settlement in Virginia. It can also be read against the grain, so to speak, as a story about indigenous power, and the inability of Europeans to survive in their "new world" without help from indigenous people who remained comfortable and powerful in their "old world." Although it is seldom explicit in the contact narratives, between the lines it is apparent that in North America, at least well into the sixteenth century, indigenous people had the power to determine the success or failure of new European settlements.[26]

Power is also at the heart of contemporary retellings. If contact stories are kept alive, it is because they have continuing importance – a role to play in each of the respective performing communities. Binney, Moore, and Wickwire describe how narratives function to redress power relations between native and newcomer. They offer insight into how history is generated and understood by a people, and look at how some indigenous people respond to political and economic domination in story. Indigenous storytellers may challenge the legitimacy of the arrival of Europeans or explain it as the working out of a supernatural process that belongs in their own mythology, as in the case of the Robinson stories in Wickwire's chapter. The accounts may poke fun at the Europeans, levelling the playing field so to speak, as the Kaska stories do in Moore's chapter. Humour and irony are common strategies to challenge and reorder hierarchies of power.[27]

Contact stories are reperformed in the context of settler nations to naturalize the presence of Europeans in former indigenous spaces, but they also have a more fundamental role to play in supporting European ways of knowing. Mary Louise Pratt has written about how exploration is tied to the expansion of science in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. She shows how science provided Europeans with a way of knowing the world.[28] Since

then, Europeans have attempted to universalize a specifically European world view which they call "scientific" or "rational."

In Chapter 5, I.S. MacLaren gives a concrete example of how contact narratives, themselves performances and imaginary productions, were used in the nineteenth century by Herbert Spencer as part of the foundation for the modern scientific discipline of sociology. Like Linnaeus, who, a century before, had used travellers' accounts of Patagonian giants, Amazons, and other mythological creatures to build his taxonomy of animals, Spencer avidly combed the exploration accounts of his day to create a science of society that would distinguish Europeans from "primitive" cultures. Spencer's description of so-called primitive societies was the foundation on which he based his idea of Europe's progress. One of the groups he chose to make his "scientific comparison" was the Chinook people of what is now the Oregon-Washington border in the United States. As MacLaren shows, Spencer's main source was the eyewitness narrative of Paul Kane – only Paul Kane did not write the section in his book on the Chinook people. Kane's published narrative actively exaggerated his encounters with the indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest, and his ghostwriter(s) freely plagiarized from other travellers, whose own accounts bordered on the apocryphal. From its birth, sociology, like science and the other social sciences more generally, drew on the mythologized interpretations of Europe's contact with the other. Then, "scientific knowledge" was used as a marker of European superiority over indigenous mythology and superstition, and part of the larger rationale for colonization.

Conclusion

Contact – the moment when the match hits the striker, sparks fire the tinder, a flash of light illuminates an encounter. It is the moment when stories begin; we seem to be drawn to the moment – the story – like moths to a flame.

All the writing in this book, ironically, is about listening. Collectively, the chapters offer an introduction to the range of acceptable renderings of the past in some indigenous and European cultures. John Sutton Lutz, I.S. MacLaren, and Michael Harkin all remind us that the European contact accounts are stories too. Keith Thor Carlson, Patrick Moore, Wendy Wickwire, and Judith Binney show that indigenous stories are history. The Dauenhauers invite us to look at the people who were themselves the point of contact between cultures, and J. Edward Chamberlin writes about the difference between hearing and listening. Listening is the stage of comprehension, of paying attention, which follows acknowledging sounds. If we know how, we can listen to written accounts too, hearing old stories in new ways and unsettling our familiar notions of first contact and all the history that follows.

Contact narratives (especially European) are sometimes taken as history and sometimes (especially indigenous ones) as myth. They are sometimes taken as works of literature or of science. In fact, these are not separate categories. Myth and history, science and fiction, are not exclusive but complementary and inseparable ways of knowing. Contact stories were and are all of these things.

The encounter moments, so full of misunderstandings, were worked into both science and myth. In each culture, the stories are now part of education, history, folklore, and "common-sense" knowledge that guides our understanding of current events. Such stories, as the great indigenous storyteller Thomas King reminds us, "assert tremendous control over our lives, informing who we are and how we treat one another as friends, family, and citizens."[29]

Critically reading/hearing contact stories means engaging "myth understandings." Rethinking contact narratives means rethinking the relationship between history and myth, an activity that, as Jonathan Hill has argued, should not be reserved solely for scholars. It is a road to understanding our "own modes of mythic and historical consciousness" and how they differ from those in other societies. And this is what it takes, writes Michel Foucault, to "free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently."[30]

When we read or listen to contact stories, we are immediately spirited into the contact zone where different cultures are meeting. We become the translators. And as the Dauenhauers show, translators inevitably change meanings. We cannot help but put our own spin on the accounts, which have themselves been spun by someone else. This is discouraging news if we are looking for absolute truth about the past, but if our goal is understanding past and present, there is something very encouraging in this knowledge.

The hopeful part is that, for us, like those we read about, something is communicated at contact, in spite of all the transformation and misunderstanding. In spite of all that is lost in translation, something of the encounter between strangers, something about the other, is transmitted. Something of the contact moment is absorbed and each of the parties is changed, sometimes profoundly, sometimes only by the addition of a story. Either way, contact narratives show us that we have the capacity to get glimpses of a world beyond the horizon of our own cultures, beyond the fences of our minds. Every story we read or hear changes us. The contact zone is a place of hope.

1
Close Encounters of the First Kind

J. Edward Chamberlin

The Canadian two-dollar coin struck to commemorate the establishment of Nunavut – the name of the mainly Inuit (Eskimo) community in the north of Canada that received quasi-provincial status in 1999 – has a picture of the queen on one side and an Inuit drum dance on the other. It is the quintessential image of encounter and its perennial paradox: state power and indigenous sovereignty, with their backs to one another.

This coin opens up a couple of other issues, often lost sight of in our preoccupation with narrative. First of all, the initial encounters between Natives and newcomers were not always chronicled in stories, but sometimes in songs or dramatic performances, in music or in dance. One of the reasons we routinely discredit each other's accounts may be that we misinterpret their form, mistaking a dog for a clumsy cat, as it were, or a coin for a silly stone. The ceremonies that celebrated first encounters – the stories and songs and dancing and drumming and paintings and carvings – depended upon traditions of imaginative exchange, which, like any currency, were worthless unless someone believed in them. But crediting someone else's currency doesn't come naturally ... until we are actually in their country, and have no choice.

I talked about crediting a currency. Credit means simply "he or she believes"; but exactly what is it that we believe when we believe in a currency? When it comes to that two-dollar coin, the choice would seem to be simple: the monarchy or Inuit culture. But most of us don't believe in either. And yet we credit the currency.

One of the reasons we do so is that we believe that someone or something "backs," or underwrites, it. For commercial currency, it used to be gold; now we believe it's the government, or the gross national product. But who or what backs the currency of the stories and songs of first contact? Reality? or the literary imagination? A history of events? or a tradition of performance?

There is no single answer, of course; but for us to get beyond a melodrama of Them and Us, there has to be a shared sense of the importance of the

question, and of the really quite extraordinary act of faith that any currency calls for, whether it is a piece of paper, the sound of a word, or the movements and masks of a dance. Otherwise, our traditions of imaginative expression become nothing more than minor local currencies that either nobody credits or everybody uses with a tourist's genial contempt.

What is fundamental here is the arbitrariness of *all* currencies, which is to say of all traditions of expression. "By the meaningless sign linked to the meaningless sound we have built the shape and meaning of western man," said Marshall McLuhan.[1] He was talking about words and images, and how we recognize them as representations of ideas and things; but he could have been talking about all the ceremonies of belief that make up our imaginative and spiritual lives. And he should have said humankind all around the world, for it is in the embrace of arbitrariness – and the artifice of assigning significance – that we ultimately constitute our communities. Often these seem silly to those who don't grow up in them; but it is these arbitrary forms of imaginative currency – language being only the most obvious – that hold us together even as they keep others apart.

All of this is bound up with questions about mirroring and making, as well as about meaning and motive, which are the stock-in-trade of all our work. I'll begin with a story told by the folklorist Barre Toelken.[2] It has to do with an armband of tiny glass beads stitched on buckskin, made for him by a friend from one of the southern Oregon coastal tribes. He was wearing it when a woman from one of the northern California tribes came up to him and said "that's very pretty, nice beadwork, but you know of course it's not an armband. It's a basket." And he said, understandably enough, "well, you certainly couldn't carry much in it. It's something you put on your arm." This is Toelken's account of the rest of their conversation:

> I tried to explain to this old lady that this really wasn't a basket. This was an armband. She very patiently tried to explain to me that it is too a basket and not an armband. She said, "Of course it is an armband. Anybody can see that, but it is really a basket." And she went on to explain that the Indian people in this area of California and southern Oregon have been making baskets for generations, for thousands of years, but they very seldom make these baskets any more because the distinctive kind of grass they need is almost never available any more. It's the shoot that comes up after a fire. In the old days the people in the area used to ... burn off the underbrush every year which would provide a new growth of grass which would attract animals like deer and other small animals ... Baskets became known in many of the tribes not simply as things to hold food in or things that might be made up of certain design, but ... symbolic of the process of interaction between people and nature. Not just items but something beyond items. And when that grass was no longer available because the forest service keeps

> the forest from burning off every year so these shoots are not there any more, at least not in enough abundance to make baskets, but people can buy beads, they started converting to another medium the same designs that were once used in the baskets, but of course now there are different requirements. The medium is different. It looks different. The shape is different. The stuff is different. You might say the thing itself has become something different. But the idea has been maintained.

Then Toelken told another story, about a woman he invited from a northern California tribe to come to the University of Oregon, where he was working at the time, to teach basket weaving. Many students, especially local craftspeople, enrolled in the four-week class. By the end of the third week, a number of them, who had paid quite a bit to take the class and wanted to learn how to weave from somebody who really knew the traditional way, were becoming quite frustrated because they hadn't yet done any basket weaving. All they had learned was some songs. "We love these songs," they said to her, "but when do we get to the baskets?" The Aboriginal weaver looked confused and said, "that's what we're doing. A basket is a song made visible."

Just when his audience was about to feel a more or less respectful distance from all this basket business, Toelken talked about bowls, specifically the chalice used in Roman Catholic and other Christian Communion ceremonies.

> It's a cup to hold liquid. Now what's your response if you happen to be standing around a church and a visitor from another country, say from China, comes along. He's got a rented car. Suddenly something goes wrong with the car. He decides to drain the water out of the radiator, or the oil out of the oilpan. He rushes around looking for something to put the liquid in. He goes into this unlocked building and sees this nice big container for liquids up on a table in the front, and so he carries it out and starts to put it under his car. Do you say "Well, go ahead. Nobody is using it in a religious service right now. Go ahead and drain your oil, and we'll clean up later." Most of us would say "Wait a minute. You can't do that. That's a chalice. That's a sacred item." And the visitor is going to say, "I don't know. It doesn't look sacred to me. It's for holding liquids. I need it very badly. See, I've got problems with my car. What's wrong with this society? This is backward." And you're going to be saying to him, "Look, no, no. That's a cup, sure enough, but that's a cup that means something else."

To many of us these are well-known sorts of stories, of a type that defamiliarizes familiar objects and thereby forces us to look at them in a new light – making strange so that we can make believe. This is what art always does, in fact, and when I raised earlier the possibility that lyric and dramatic

modes may sometimes be as significant as narrative ones when it comes to representations of first encounters with others, I was thinking about how different modes of expression are premised on different forms of defamiliarization, each of which establishes different borderlines between reality and the imagination. Also, they are backed for belief by different assumptions about representation.

We are mainly concerned in this book with representation in language, so I will focus my comments there. In doing so, I want to turn our attention to the dynamics of listening and reading, instead of speaking and writing, and to replace the power politics of oral and written traditions that are the darling of postcolonial studies with the deep contradictions that lie at the heart of all verbal and visual representation.

One of these, which preoccupies historians, has to do with whether such representations are true or not. We will come back to this, for it troubles us especially when our accounts are in conflict. But there is another, equally perplexing, contradiction that has to do with an uncertainty about whether we live in or outside of our representations. This is both an ancient unease and a very contemporary one. It is bound up with contradictory ideas about whether language creates our thoughts and feelings or merely conveys them, and it has an interesting connection with first encounters. It used to be said that all words were originally metaphors, each embodying the sudden wonder of an encounter with something strange, and transforming it into what the twentieth-century philosopher Ernst Cassirer (following the nineteenth-century philologist Max Mueller) referred to as a "momentary god."[3] The god then becomes the word, according to this theory, in the same way that the wafer and the wine become the body and the blood of Christ in the Christian Communion. Theologians call it transubstantiation. Literary critics call it metaphor. We might as well call it a contradiction, and a pretty unnerving one at that.

Yet we often seem remarkably comfortable with it. Not necessarily with the Communion service, of course, though lots of people the world over believe in something like this within their various religions. But even those who do not, those who are unlikely to believe in things such as transubstantiation, routinely repeat the creed of their faith in defiance of the very dubious things that it contains and the doubt that is in their hearts. I mean no disrespect by this; for at the moment of saying so, they *do* believe.

There's something else here. These moments of encounter, transubstantiated into words, become communal as soon as they become language. That is, they are shared with others. So, of course, are the ceremonies that commemorate these encounters, which typically involve some sort of congregation. When you think about it, it is rather odd that we would want to say questionable things when others can hear us. Surely we would want to keep

these moments – when we are challenged to "believe it or not" – strictly private. And yet we regularly go public with them; when we sing our national anthems, to take a secular example, we use words and phrases about people and places that we would almost certainly question in any other context. We say we believe when maybe we really don't ... except right at that moment, the ceremonial moment when the border is crossed, the covenant is renewed, and the challenge is to "believe it *and* not." At other times, it all degenerates into soggy wafers and some old wine, or a chalice that could be mistaken for an oil can, or some maudlin and melodramatic (and often brutally mistaken) words about home and native land.

All chronicles of events, it turns out, are ceremonies of belief. That is how language works; and once again, an old theory of language may help us here. Those first words I just mentioned – the resonant metaphors, the momentary gods – soon slip into conventional use. They become currency, like a two-dollar coin, and we lose our consciousness of their arbitrariness. They become what Ralph Waldo Emerson used to call fossil metaphors, for the life has gone out of them ... until singers and storytellers bring it back, making old words new again, turning the currency back into gold, refreshing language by restoring the wonder of metaphor and the strangeness of that moment of encounter.

Strangeness is the key. It signals that we are about to cross a border. I think the problem with some stories and songs from other cultures is not their strangeness, which part of us always welcomes, but the fact that we miss the signals they give that we are at the border; or we mistake them for signals of something else. This happens *within* communities often enough; but it is especially the case across cultures, where distinctions between myth and history, for instance – and the different arbitrariness or strangeness in the storytelling style of each – may be marked quite differently. In theatre, the stage itself provides a signal of the strange world we are entering, which may be why theatre travels fairly well across cultures. Most of us know all about entering a space in which Hamlet is both the Prince of Denmark and Laurence Olivier, or the figure dancing before us is both Raven and Uncle Fred.

Which is where metaphor, the basic trick of language, comes in: saying something is something else that it obviously is not, simultaneously allowing us to live in two worlds and undermining our ability – and, at least momentarily, our need – to distinguish between them.

Barre Toelken tells a story about living in southern Utah with his wife's family when he became very ill, contracting pneumonia. There was no doctor, no physician nearby. But there was a medicine man, a Native American diagnostician. The family called him in, and he concluded that Barre was suffering from a particular malady whose cure would be the red-ant

ceremony. So a man who was very well versed in that ceremony, a seer, a kind of specialist in the red-ant ceremony, came in and administered it to him. Soon after that, he recovered completely.

Not long afterwards, Toelken, who was very curious about what had taken place, said to his father-in-law, "I wonder about the red-ant ceremony. Why is it that the diagnostician prescribed that particular ceremony for me?" His father-in-law replied, "Well, it was obvious to him that there were red ants in your system, and so we had to call in a seer to take the red ants out of your system." Incredulous, Toelken said, "Yes, but surely you don't mean that there were red ants inside of me." His father-in-law looked at him for a moment, then said, "Not ants, but ants."[4]

The Kiowa writer Scott Momaday, author of the novel *House Made of Dawn,* once used this story to describe how a traditional Indian view of nature involved bringing man and nature into alignment, first of all to achieve some kind of moral order and then to enable a person "not only to see what is really there, but also to see what is *really* there. Unless we understand this distinction," we will have difficulty understanding the Indian view of the natural world.

This kind of contradiction can be found in all cultural traditions – it is the basis of story and song in the sciences as well as in the arts – and unless we understand what Toelken and Momaday are saying, we may have difficulty understanding not just the Indian but *any* view of the natural world, including our own. There is also an interesting connection between Toelken's diagnostician and contemporary critical theory. The word "semiotics," popularized by Umberto Eco (author of the novel *The Name of the Rose*), comes originally from medical diagnostics, and simply means the interpretation of "signs." Hippocrates, the founder of medical science, first used it to refer to a patient's symptoms. Semiotics has become not so much the study of truthtelling as of everything that can be used in order to deceive us. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, Eco once suggested, it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot, in fact, be used to "tell" at all.[5]

We are discussing deep contradictions here, but they are ones we all know about. I want to use the example of tracking to underline how ancient this knowledge is, and also to shift attention (as I promised to do) from the cultural politics of speaking and writing to the cognitive dynamics of listening and reading. It is now generally argued that reading rather than writing signalled a change in human consciousness, as new reading practices followed the development of print technologies and nourished the great Renaissance innovations in reading the Book of Nature and the Book of God, which became modern science and Protestantism. But even scholars as attentive to ethnocentric epistemologies as Michel Foucault assume that it is only relatively recently that sign systems such as language have

come to be understood as representations. I am convinced that the cognitive and cultural advances we associate with the development of reading practices in medieval and modern Europe were in fact flourishing thirty thousand years ago in the highly sophisticated reading practices of hunter-trackers around the world, who had an understanding of the contradictions of representation that was as complex as anything we might associate with the Renaissance.

The one thing trackers know when they see a track is that the animal isn't there. That's all they know. And they know that's all they know. This knowledge is at the heart of hunting and tracking; and it is at the heart of reading. I am not talking here about the ability of trackers to see animal signs, which paradoxically has led most commentators to miss the point. The systematic recognition of signs by traditional trackers is remarkable. But it is not reading. Rather, it is a necessary preliminary, the way recognizing a script or hearing a speech sound is. It is the first half of the process. The other half is how these signs are made to signify. Reading is qualitatively different from seeing, just as listening is from hearing; and in the case of reading, it involves learning to recognize the difference between a thing and the (always arbitrary, and sooner or later conventional) representation of a thing – the difference between a bear and the word "bear" or the spoor of a bear. This is what tracking is all about. It is also what we do when we learn how to read. We learn that the word's the thing. Which is to say, we learn that it is *not* the thing.

Like texts, then, tracks must be invested with arbitrariness in order to be read, for it is this arbitrariness that creates the distance that allows for the recognition of words or signs as representations. This is what we talk about when we identify the literary sign as the site of a relationship between the self and the other, creating difference. This is also what we should be talking about when we consider stories and songs of first encounters.

With familiarity, of course, we tend to naturalize all signs, whether we are engaged in hunting or hermeneutics; but we retain an awareness of their artifice, their arbitrariness, when we read them. That is why poetry is useful: it restores arbitrariness to language. We can find an interesting illustration of this in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dictionaries and encyclopaedias in which definitions of poetry always included an exemplary speech by an Indian chief. Of course, we could call this romantic nostalgia. But we could also see in it an instinct (which we have all but lost) for the necessary artifice of any engagement with otherness.

We need constantly to remind ourselves how the uncertainties of representation (whether something is there or not) and of communication (whether we believe the teller or the tale) generate the very certainties to which we give assent in any story or song. Only then will we realize how

our culturally conditioned awareness of artifice and otherness is linked with our cognitive awareness of arbitrariness and difference, and how this connection provides us with an understanding of texts, and of the reality they represent.

Let's take a moment to listen to Oscar Wilde, the godfather of all commentary over the past hundred years on the imaginative artifice of representation and the social construction of reality. "Where, if not from the Impressionists," he wrote,

> do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? ... The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of Art ... Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist until art had invented them. Now, it must be admitted fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold.[6]

With all the wit there is wisdom in this argument, and in its most famous aphorism, Wilde's signature song: "life imitates art." In another part of the essay (mischievously titled "The Decay of Lying") in which this passage appears, Wilde proposed that "the telling of beautiful untrue things" is the proper aim of all storytelling, and that the liar "is the very basis of civilized society." Perhaps this is why the Trickster – from the Greek god Hermes and the west African (and now West Indian) spider Anansi to the crafty Coyote and unreliable Raven of Native America – is at the centre of so many traditions of story and song.

Children know all about this, for they learn when very young about the contradictions of truthtelling. "It was, and it was not" is how storytellers of Majorca begin their stories. "Once upon a time" is how many of us begin ours, conjuring up both time immemorial and bedtime. Among the herders and hunters of southern Namibia and the Kalahari, where I have been working for the past few years, the word *"/garube"* is used; it means "the happening that is not happening." (Their language is Khoikhoi, the majority language of southern Namibia and widely spoken in the Northern Cape of

South Africa.) Interestingly, the root of |garube is */garu,* which means inconsistent speech by a sober person, the kind of speech or story that hovers between the accidental and the deliberate. It is not necessarily serious; and it is assumed that a story in such speech will be understood only by those who recognize the uncertainty of motive behind it. There is a prefix, */gu,* which is sometimes used to intensify this sense of uncertainty; it refers to a story told by a dying person to someone else as his or her inheritance. Stories don't get much more serious, or more motivated, than that. Which creates an interesting convergence. The combination */gu*/*garu* is used by Khoikhoi speakers to refer to stories that nestle between fact and fiction, between intentional seriousness and unconscious fantasy; and some Khoikhoi speakers in Namibia, who have been Christians for hundreds of years, use it to refer to the Bible, a contact narrative par excellence.

"Infinity is a place where things happen that don't," say the mathematicians, reminding us that this is the realm of the sciences too (since physicists give wonderful descriptions of atoms as miniature galaxies with colourful planets, curious moons, and remarkable orbits – and then admit that nobody has ever actually seen one).[7] The novelist E.L. Doctorow was once criticized for bringing characters together in his historical novel *Ragtime* who could not possibly have met in real life. "They have now," he replied. The German theatre critic Joachim Fiebach talks about how in certain stories words such as "ancestor" need to be translated very carefully, because they imply a dichotomy that many of us really don't accept. Then he quotes a Zulu expression, "father is departed, but he is." *Did the Greeks Believe Their Myths?* asks the French classicist Paul Veyne in the title of his book. Yes and no, he answers.[8]

At the end of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* James Joyce has his character vow "to forge the uncreated conscience of his race." The word "forge" is carefully chosen to catch the contradiction: it's both a forging and a forgery. The original Greek word for a trick was *dolos,* and the first trick was baiting a hook for a fish. Hermes, the messenger of the gods in Greek mythology, began his career when he was one day old by stealing cattle from Apollo, which he then barbecued but didn't eat, thereby making the point that some things are valuable not because they are useful but because they are special. Or, if you are a thief, because they belong to someone else. Lewis Hyde, in a book called *Trickster Makes This World,* catches the character of this kind of imaginative sleight of hand when he says that "Hermes is neither the god of the door leading out nor the god of the door leading in – he is the god of the hinge."[9]

Borders and hinges. Along with crossroads, these are among our most compelling images of the place where stories and songs work their magic. They are also, notoriously, places of conflict. Let's turn to an illustration of what can happen there, this time in a recent encounter. When the Gitksan

and Wet'suwet'en peoples of the northwest of what is now British Columbia, Canada, went to court to confirm jurisdiction over their territory in what has become known as the *Delgamuukw* case, they told the history of their people in the stories and songs that represent their past – *ada'ox* and *kungax* they call them. One of the Gitksan elders, Antgulilibix (Mary Johnson), was telling her particular ada'ox – the cycle of stories and songs that were in her custody – to the court. At a certain point, she said that she must now sing a song. The judge, Allan McEachern, was flummoxed, for the request seemed to him to flaunt the decorums of his court. He tried to explain how uncomfortable he felt having someone sing in his court. He also said that it was unlikely to get him any nearer the truth that he was seeking. He asked the lawyer for the Gitksan whether it might not be sufficient to have just the words written down, and avoid the performance. Met with a dignified intransigence, he finally agreed to let Mary Johnson sing her song; but just as she was about to start, he fired his final salvo. "It's not going to do any good to sing it to me," he said. "I have a tin ear."[10]

Judge McEachern was roundly criticized for his comments, both by the wider community and by the Supreme Court of Canada, which later heard the case on appeal. It was indeed a stupid thing to say, for he wasn't the least bit interested in the song or its music anyway. But it was also a smart thing to say; for he *did* have a tin ear, and he couldn't have listended to the music even if he *were* interested in it. Most of us go through life assuming that we could make not only music but meaning out of Mary Johnson's song. For the Mary Johnsons of the world, it is a sinister assumption. It is an assumption that understanding sophisticated oral traditions comes naturally to the sympathetic ear. It doesn't. Just as we learn how to read, so we learn how to listen; and this learning does not come naturally. It requires what the literary critic Northrop Frye used to call an educated imagination.[11]

For there is nothing remotely natural about listening. Hearing, yes; but not listening. We recognize this distinction when it comes to seeing and reading, but are less aware of it when it comes to hearing and listening. And yet reminders are all around us, such as the strict protocols of almost all oral traditions in which only certain people can tell certain stories to certain people in certain places on certain occasions wearing certain regalia – like judges, or priests. Or in which (as in ancient Greece) a lyric had to be sung, an epic recited, a dramatic performance spoken.

Frye has written a lot about reading; but in one of his notebooks from the 1940s, he turned his attention to listening. "Learning to listen to music easily and without panic is a valuable discipline," he proposed, "essentially the removal of the barriers of panic and laziness." This is what Judge McEachern could not or would not do. When confronted by the music of Mary Johnson's testimony, he panicked; in courtly language, he said it made

him feel "judicially embarrassed."[12] And he was lazy, for he didn't want to be bothered to learn the listening protocols, much less the language, within which the song made sense. He knew they were there – he had moved the court from Vancouver to Smithers and had waived the venerable hearsay rule to accommodate them – but he couldn't be bothered to go any further.

Belligerent conservatives ask better questions than sympathetic liberals, which is why I am interested in Judge McEachern, his tin ear, and his tendentious "why not just write it down." He said something else as he dismissed the case. He said he believed Mary Johnson, but not her ada'ox. Another stupid statement. Certainly none of *us* would have said it. But it picks up that central question: do we believe the singer or the song? Far from being the product of twentieth-century arrogance, this reflects an ancient uncertainty that is right at the heart of many great traditions of pronouncement and performance, such as those of religion and poetry and law. And it bedevils our response to stories and songs of first contact.

From our discussion of credit, we know that belief and truth are not synonyms. With music, much of its power has nothing to do with what we call truthtelling, which may be why the judge was so uncomfortable. But we all know what it is to "believe" in a piece of music, even though we might not use that word (or, like Judge McEachern, might not be ready to give credit because we don't recognize the currency). Music and speech have long been linked in discussions about the origins of language, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to how we listen. Frye's offhand remark provides a useful point of entry, one which retains the imaginative as well as the instrumental dimension of listening. Panic and laziness conjure up a set of aesthetic counterparts that have long been accepted in the critical analysis of literary texts but which hold across disciplines: engagement and detachment; familiarity and strangeness; sympathy and judgment; the mystery of performance and the relative clarity of commentary. It may be useful to bring these to bear on contact situations. The uncertainty that defines listening – that leaves us hovering between story and storyteller, and wondering whether bearing witness is what the speaker does or the listener – is perhaps an ontological as well as an epistemological condition. Whatever the case, learning to listen is a complex and cognitively sophisticated process, which is why school (or its early equivalent) is one long lesson in the discipline of listening, of sitting silently while being taught to manage the twin menaces of panic and laziness, known in the teaching trade as anxiety and boredom; and of learning how to believe in the arbitrariness of it all.

And then there is the matter of truth. The Nobel laureate Halldor Laxness, on the eleven-hundredth anniversary of the settlement of his native Iceland, suggested that Icelanders have descended as much from books as they have from men. He was referring to the great sagas that have a central

place in their literary tradition, and which have become their history, true within one of those narratives of nationhood that we all live by. Laxness poked fun at the invention of Icelandic genealogies which traced pedigrees back to Homer's Troy, and he described the storytelling of one Arngrimur Jonsson, who in the late sixteenth century set out to counteract the belief that Icelanders were the descendants of robbers, murderers, and slave owners with another version, straight from the sagas of medieval Iceland, in which they came from a long line of aristocratic heroes, noble commoners, and poets. In due course, his history changed northerners' sense of themselves. "Before Arngrimur's time," said Laxness,

> nobody seems to have asked whether the sagas were "true" or not. It is not very likely that the problem had ever come up. Arngrimur was the one who discovered that question, as well as the answer to it: all true. To a people enjoying true literature, it was an irrelevant question to ask, and the answer incomprehensible; a question inconsistent with your mental makeup – and with the world you live in. Like all great art, the saga is too great a truth in itself to be compared with reality. Such people were never born in the world who talk, or for that matter act, like the characters of, say, *Njal's Saga*.[13]

How then to judge the truth of a story or a song? How to decide whether we are in the realm of the imagination or in reality? One trick is to see things from different perspectives, recognizing that stories and songs work in two ways: they express their meanings in more or less direct communication; and they reveal them in what might be called fields of force. Most good ones do something of each; and listening and reading almost always involve both. Our unease with other people's stories and songs is often caught up in our uncertainty about the dynamics of expression and revelation, which is essentially the same uncertainty that bothered Judge McEachern about whether truth inhered in the telling or the tale, and whether the song represented reality or not.

Behind both of these is the uncertainty that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. When we bear witness about someone or something, our own credibility is always being judged; but a judgment is also being made about whoever or whatever certifies or backs our testimony. Though we don't always recognize it, it is often the ceremony itself that certifies the commentary; which once again brings us back to the role of the community – or those who are paid by it, such as priests and professors – to confirm that the ceremony is properly performed. Identifying the ways in which texts are underwritten by the artifice (a.k.a. the arbitrariness) of that ceremony and the assent of the community may do more than anything else to help us understand other people's stories and songs, and to judge their truth.

But though the notion of contradictory truths may be troubling to many of us, it shouldn't be. We routinely accept all sorts of contradictions. Think of two painters sitting early one evening across the harbour from a ship at anchor there. One of them, working in one particular mode of truthtelling, paints the ship according to the knowledge that she has of it – for instance, that it has twenty-seven portholes, and is grey. The other, working in an equally creditable tradition, paints seven portholes, because that's all he can see in the twilight; and he paints it in unlikely tones of pink and green, because that's what it looks like from where he's sitting at that hour of the day. He knows it's wrong; but he also knows it's right. The so-called Impressionists in the nineteenth century, who were sticklers for truth as they saw it even when what they saw was a pink cathedral, used to call this "seeing with an innocent eye," one undirected – unsocialized might be the current term – by painterly conventions and viewer expectations.[14]

Which is the true portrait? Both are determined as much by conventions of style – or ceremonies – as they are by any certainties; and either, taken out of its frame of reference, can be made to seem false or foolish. On the other hand, both are believable; and people believe both, praising each for its authenticity and authority.

Every imaginative tradition has allegiances both to the facts of experience, which in a sense are part of us, and to the formalities of expression, which are separate from us. To life and to art, we might say. Two truths? Perhaps; but instead of two truths we might say two stories, which together help us chart the convergence of reality and the imagination, showing us how conventions of visual or verbal representation are best understood not in isolation but by seeing where they meet others, and the world.

Let me give an illustration from two traditions of stories and songs, one ancient and the other contemporary. The Gitksan people of northwest British Columbia have lived in the mountains fishing and hunting and farming and trading for thousands of years. They have a story that tells of changes to one of the river valleys, near the mountain called Stekyooden, across from the village of Temlaxam.[15] It was once the centre of their world, one of those places that bring peace and prosperity to the people who live there.

This valley nourished the Gitksan so well that they became unmindful of their good fortune and forgot the ways that the mountains and the rivers and the plants and the animals had taught them. The spirit of the valley, a grizzly bear called Mediik who lived by Stekyooden, warned them and gave them many signs of his anger; but they ignored these warnings, until finally he got so angry that he came roaring down from the top of the mountain. Grizzlies running uphill are breathtakingly fast; I've been chased by one, and he looked like a freight train impersonating a gazelle. But because their front legs are short, grizzlies sometimes tumble coming downhill, and Mediik

brought half the mountain with him, covering the valley floor and the village of Temlaxam and all the people there. Only a few survived, those who were out hunting in the high country or berry picking on the opposite slopes or doing the hard work that makes for an easy life.

This was just about thirty-five hundred years ago. Over time, the people returned to the valley, and although never the rich and fertile home it once had been, it always held its place in their history; and they remember the great grizzly and the lesson he taught them. Today the stories of the Gitksan move out from that valley like spokes from the hub of a wheel or children from their parents. It is the centre of their lives, the place they came from, and the place to which they return their thoughts and their thanks. Their present-day claims to the territory arise from the claims that the valley has on them, and the story of the grizzly and the slide confirms both claims.

Several years ago, when the Gitksan decided to assert their claims in court, they told this story. They told it with all the ritual that it required, for, as Mary Johnson reminded the court, the stories and songs that represent their past are about belief, and therefore need ceremony.

So do all stories, they realized. They also realized that the story of the grizzly and the sacred mountain called Stekyooden and the village of Temlaxam, which in their minds confirmed the presence of their people in that place for millennia, might not be believed by the judge, schooled as he was in stories of a different sort. So one of their leaders, Neil Sterritt, suggested they draw on another storyline to complement their own. They had geologists drill under the lake (now called Seeley Lake) that fills the valley, take a core sample, and analyze it. A scientific ceremony. The geologists discovered soil and plant material which matched that high up on the mountain slope, exposed where the grizzly had taken down the hillside – or where the earthquake had produced the slide that brought down half the mountain. And the sample dated from the exact time when the Gitksan story said the grizzly grew angry with the people in the valley, thirty-five hundred years ago.

The court was inclined to see the scientific story as confirming the legendary one. However, the elders of the Gitksan were at pains to persuade the judge that each story was validated by the other; that neither had a monopoly on understanding what happened; that the storyline of geology was framed by a narrative just as much the product of invention as the story told by their people; and that each storyteller's imagination – whether telling of tectonic plates or of grizzly outrage – was engaged with discovering a reality that included much more than the merely human.

The story of the grizzly is a very old one, hardened on an anvil of ancient tellings and tested by memories that disputed it for much longer than our seismic and sedimentary theories. The Gitksan believe both of them. Both,

for them, are true. "Bear" and bear, as it were. Both are necessary for their people to live their lives. And both are revealed in stories.

The Mediik story may seem familiar to many of us, of course, because it is the story of a flood; *the* flood, for the Gitksan. Nonetheless, its power comes not from that connection, nor from the fact that flood stories are very common across cultures, but from the way it complements other historical and scientific accounts and yet still insists on its own authority, without discrediting others.