

Jennifer Kramer

Switchbacks
Art, Ownership, and Nuxalk
National Identity



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Contents

Maps / vi

Acknowledgments / vii

Prologue: The Repatriation of the Nuxalk Echo Mask / ix

- 1** Introduction / 3
- 2** The History of Bella Coola: A History of Theft / 23
- 3** “Selling Out” or “Buying In”? Identity Politics and Art Objectification in Bella Coola / 45
- 4** Privileged Knowledge versus Public Education: Tensions at *Acwsalcta*, the Nuxalk Nation “Place of Learning” / 66
- 5** Physical and Figurative Repatriation: Case Studies of the Nuxalk Echo Mask and the Nuxalk Sun Mask / 87
- 6** Theft Inside and Out: The Making of a Theory / 104
- 7** Conclusions: Articulating Nuxalk National Identity / 117

Notes / 128

References / 137

Index / 147

Maps

- 1 Traditional territory of Nuxalk Nation in relation to other central coast First Nations in British Columbia / 2
- 2 Nuxalk Nation traditional territory and reserves / 26

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Prologue: The Repatriation of the Nuxalk Echo Mask

In August 1995, during my initial field visit to Bella Coola, I attended a wedding anniversary feast in the Nuxalk hall. First we ate, then there were speeches, and finally there were what the Nuxalk termed “Indian dances.” This was my first encounter with Echo. Echo is a supernatural creature known by the Nuxalk from when they first descended to the Bella Coola Valley from above, thousands of years ago. It is said that Echo (or *sats’alan* in Nuxalk) was very clever at learning languages and so acted as a herald to call people to dances. He often imitated the voices around him and possessed a proud and aristocratic disposition (McIlwraith 1992, 1:46, 306; 2:274). The Nuxalk represent Echo with a masked dancer, who performs a specific choreography of mouth changes, while a song about Echo’s activities is sung in Nuxalk (*Coast Mountain News* 1990a, 15; Sandoval 1997, 9).¹ The mask I saw danced was painted bright green with circular bulging eyes, swirly eyebrows, and a shock of hair on top. Bright red mouths were inserted representing different facial expressions. I remember I was very impressed with Echo; its features were mesmerizing, its eyes hypnotizing. I felt an intensity of meaning but could not pinpoint its source because I was not given an explanation of Echo’s value to the Nuxalk. No story was told to go with the mask, the song, and the dance steps. It appeared to me a mystery or a secret, and, at the time, I could not ask for an explanation.

I witnessed this performance only once, because two months later, in October 1995, a Nuxalk elder of Bella Coola sold the mask to a non-Native art dealer from Victoria for Cdn\$35,000. This particular mask had been photographed in 1924 by anthropologist Harlan Smith (Tepper 1991, 139-41). The mask, which is believed to be over 140 years old, was passed down through the generations, gaining an incredibly complicated genealogy both in the minds of the Nuxalk who remember and the scholars who photographed and recorded its existence.

There is much contention in Bella Coola over who owns this Echo mask. As one Nuxalk man told me: “Too many people owned it. The people owned

it ... Everybody wanted it, like it was everybody's mask, so many families. Even today I don't know who it belongs to. It was always in dispute as long as I can remember. It is family-owned, but a big family." I was told by various members of different Nuxalk families how they could claim or had claimed ownership of this mask. There are two interconnected explanations for this confusion. First, the Nuxalk, like many First Nations in British Columbia, had their population decimated due to diseases brought by European and American explorers and settlers. The Nuxalk were most affected by the 1862-63 smallpox epidemic. Families were so reduced that there were many interfamily adoptions, which wreaked havoc with the traditional inheritance of chiefly status and secret society membership, thus creating a tangle of crests. The second explanation for this confusion, which partially stems from the first, is that it is not remembered whether this particular Echo mask is a secret society (*kusiut*) or chiefly (*sisook*) privilege; consequently, there is much uncertainty about its ownership before the epidemic. In any case, the Nuxalk elder who sold the Echo mask probably did so to get rid of an object that was causing much interfamily squabbling.²

It is curious that the selling of the physical mask seems to have stopped the dance's performance in Bella Coola for a number of years. As the art dealer told me, he bought the physical mask, not the rights to perform the Echo masked dance. Technically, another Echo mask could have been carved and been used in the dance.³ In fact, the art dealer claims he had a copy of the mask made for the elder. I have no knowledge of whether this is so, although I do know there exists at least one, and maybe two, recently carved Echo masks in the Bella Coola Valley. Perhaps the contentions in Bella Coola over ownership made the public performance of the Echo dance impossible as it would have caused too much dissent. But the elder's act did not end the problem of ownership: it merely transferred it out of the valley into an international arena.

The art dealer who bought the Echo mask stripped off the green paint to reveal a much older blue paint beneath - a cobalt blue called "Nuxalk blue" and considered to be representative of the traditional Nuxalk art style (Holm 1965, 26). The art dealer found a buyer in Chicago who was willing to pay approximately US\$250,000 for the mask, but his plans to sell it were squelched when the Canadian government, citing Canada's Cultural Property Export and Import Act (Canadian Statutes Chapter C-51), refused to grant an export permit for such an important piece of Canadian heritage.⁴ This 1977 act defines "Canadian cultural property" and thus, by trying to prevent sales outside of Canada, serves as a barrier against the loss of this property (Walden 1995). Specifically, under this act the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board has jurisdiction to delay granting export permits to any object:

- of outstanding significance by reason of its close association with Canadian history or national life, its aesthetic qualities, or its value in the study of the arts or sciences; and
- is of such a degree of national importance that its loss to Canada would significantly diminish the national heritage. (Walden 1995, 205)

An expert examiner, chosen by the government, determines whether or not an object falls under this category. If it does, then the delay period is to be used to alert Canadian institutions, mostly museums and cultural centres, to arrange an internal sale in order to keep the cultural property within the country. The federal Department of Heritage has an annual budget to provide matching funds to Canadian institutions that want to purchase those objects determined to be cultural property.

In the case of the Echo mask, the expert examiner determined that the mask was “rare,” that it had “associated documentation,” and that “its export from Canada would result in an irreplaceable loss to the moveable cultural heritage” (Alan Hoover, personal communication, 17 April 1998). Therefore, in January 1996 he recommended against issuing an export permit. Subsequently, a six-month delay period was granted to allow the Cultural Property Export Review Board to identify a Canadian institution that would purchase the mask.

Up to this point no one in Bella Coola knew that the Echo mask was gone because it had been sold in secret. The chair of the archaeology department at Simon Fraser University alerted the Nuxalk band council that the mask had been sold out of the valley (Phil Hobler, personal communication 16 March 1998). He knew this because the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Simon Fraser University had been offered the chance to buy it. Once the Nuxalk found out about the mask’s sale, they mobilized to ensure its return to the valley. The actions of the Canadian government had given the Nuxalk Nation a few months to make a bid to win institutional status for their cultural centre and then to buy back the mask with federal money from the Department of Heritage.

Because the delay period was quickly running out, the Nuxalk band council decided to sue the art dealer. They claimed that, under traditional Nuxalk law, the elder who sold the mask should be considered its custodian rather than its owner and that, therefore, she had no right to sell it. They took the dealer to civil court, and the case was heard in the British Columbia Supreme Court. The court imposed a longer interim waiting period, placing the mask in the custody of the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria until a resolution could be worked out between the Nuxalk Nation and the art dealer. Although the case was eventually settled out of court, it may have given the Nuxalk Nation leverage against the dealer. The use of the

court injunction to stave off the immediate sale of the mask outside of Canada was publicized in newspaper articles from Victoria to Toronto and carried sufficient negative publicity to convince the dealer that the mask should be sold within Canada to Nuxalk buyers (Canadian Press Release 1996a and b; McDowell 1996; Todd 1996). Although the dealer continued to proclaim his legal right to buy the mask, in the out-of-court settlement he agreed to allow the Nuxalk Nation to buy it back. The mask was purchased for Cdn\$200,000. Most of the funds were provided by the Canadian Department of Heritage, with a portion being donated by the art dealer himself. The mask thus became the property of the Nuxalk Nation as a whole in December 1997. The elder who had sold it was no longer involved in the mask's care.

The Nuxalk Nation publicly welcomed the mask's return. It now resides in a display case in the foyer of the local Bella Coola bank, taking the place of an automated banking machine (Kuhn 1997). The label beneath the mask reads:

The Echo mask belongs to the Nuxalk people. The Echo mask is a ceremonial mask which was carved in 1860 by a Nuxalk master carver. The mask is carved from alder, it has 6 interchangeable mouth pieces and has its original horse hair attached to the forehead. The Echo mask dance was performed as recently as 1995 at a winter ceremony.

The Nuxalk Nation were successful in preventing this sacred mask from being sold to a Chicago art collector. The Echo mask was repatriated to the Nuxalk people in November [sic], 1997.

The Nuxalk Nation are grateful to the federal government for their assistance in the repatriation of this very important mask to the Nuxalk people. We are also grateful to the Williams Lake and district Credit Union for their assistance in storing and safekeeping of this mask.

*Stutwinitscw*⁵ – Nuxalk Nation

Traditionally the mask would have been hidden out of sight to be brought out only for specific winter ceremonies and potlatches. It is now on twenty-four-hour display, visible to all who walk by the bank. The choice of the mask's location was based on a compromise between the Nuxalk Nation and the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board, who did not think that the Nuxalk community centre was sufficiently safe to prevent theft.

Aware of this, I was concerned about whether I had the right to photograph the Echo mask in its new location. I had meant to ask the elected band chief when I interviewed him in June of 1998, but ran out of time. Instead I queried the bank's non-Native employees regarding whether there were any stipulations about outsiders photographing the mask. After sequestering themselves in a back room, they came out and told me it would

be fine if I photographed the Echo mask as long as I did not photograph the bank itself! They were concerned more for the safety of the bank than the safety or sacredness of the mask!

Discussion

I begin with this story to alert the reader to the fluidity of material cultural objects and the complexities of exchange, which are the main foci of *Switchbacks*. I shall return to this case study in Chapter 5, but it is offered here to invoke the themes of this book: (1) the difficulties of determining ownership of cultural objects; (2) the Nuxalk use of cultural heritage as proof of nationhood; (3) the significance of Nuxalk entanglements within Canadian law and the Western art market; (4) the relationship between selling Nuxalk art (viewed as commodification) and the creation of contemporary Nuxalk identity; and (5) the Nuxalk's strategic use of accusations of cultural appropriation.

In general, I focus on the anxieties and ambivalences manifested by the Nuxalk as they negotiate interactions with outsiders. I propose that the Nuxalk oscillate between opposing stances (which I will refer to as Position A and Position B) – a paradoxical yet effective strategy. Position A: The Nuxalk take a stance of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1987, 1993), which I term “self-objectification,” in order to remain free from external definitions. This self-proclaimed identity cannot be disputed because it relies on the hard limits of an asserted unity. Ironically, it was anthropologists who first labelled “Nuxalk culture” as fixed and unchanging. Position B: The Nuxalk make use of their right to a dynamic and flexible strategy – employing Canadian federal law when it supports their cause but relying on Nuxalk law, which predates the Canadian legal system. They wish to be full participating members in a thriving art and souvenir market, recognized as possessors and creators of “authentic” First Nations art. This art can be considered “inalienable”: valued in an international art market as a salable commodity yet also opposed to that market, which is perceived as being alienating to Nuxalk national identity.

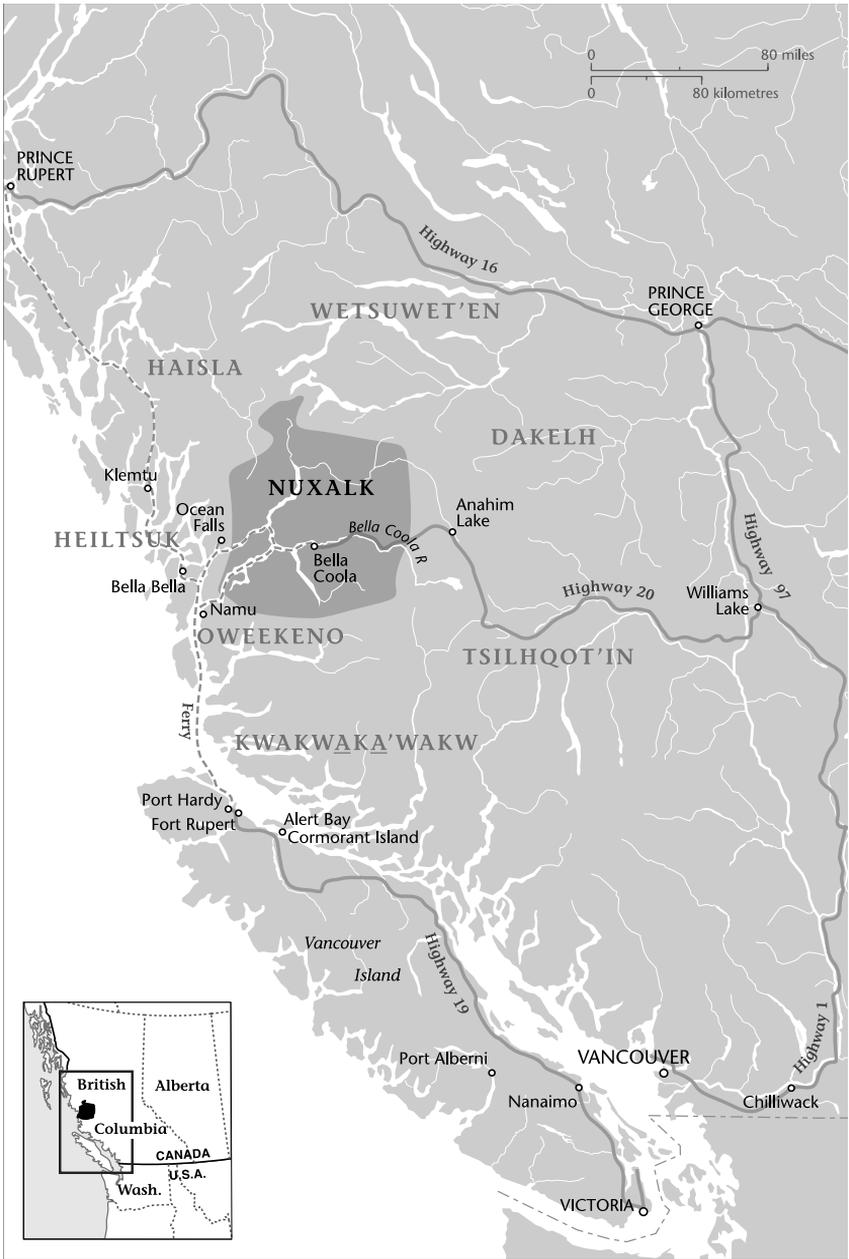
In this book I use the term “switchbacks” to evoke this oscillating movement between two poles. I selected this term for its rigidity: a switchback road zigzags back and forth between fixed points, much like the essential positions that the Nuxalk employ rhetorically, if not actually. Yet, while seemingly static, a switchback does eventually move forward. Although the Nuxalk sometimes deny the influence of the non-Native world, it is my premise that it is precisely their entanglement with the outside that creates and validates contemporary Nuxalk identity.

The first half of Chapter 1 introduces my research topic and some foundational issues in the field of Northwest Coast First Nations art. The second half discusses fieldwork in Bella Coola and my use of the term “switchbacks.”

Chapter 2 explores the conceptualizations of theft and its complexities within Nuxalk history and culture, along with the related issue of ambivalence. Chapter 3 examines the cultural context of selling art and the resulting debates. Chapter 4 describes and interprets my fieldwork experience at the Nuxalk band school known as *Acwsalcta*, or “Place of Learning.” Chapter 5 addresses “physical repatriation” in the contentious case study of the Nuxalk Echo mask and compares this strategy of national identity construction to that of the “figurative repatriation” of the Nuxalk Sun mask while it was part of the museum exhibition entitled *Down from the Shimmering Sky: Masks of the Northwest Coast*. Chapter 6 discusses the place of contemporary theft and accusations of cultural appropriation in Nuxalk lives, both inside and outside Bella Coola. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes with an examination of the relevance of an ownership-based rhetoric for today’s Nuxalk as they seek recognition of their national identity and self-determination.

In these chapters I explore attempts by the Nuxalk to negotiate such complex issues as: Who owns culture? What constitutes “authentic,” or “traditional,” cultural practice? How should cultural practices be transmitted to future generations? Where does selling and buying Nuxalk art fit into these attempts to regain control of heritage? Overall, I chart and analyze the Nuxalk’s ambivalent reactions to both ownership and appropriation of their culture and discuss how these very anxieties and their resulting actions create contemporary Nuxalk identity.

Switchbacks



Map 1 Traditional territory of Nuxalk Nation in relation to other central coast First Nations in British Columbia

1

Introduction

Beginnings

This book is the result of sixteen months of fieldwork in the town of Bella Coola, British Columbia, Canada, conducted between June 1995 and November 2001. An additional three months of fieldwork were completed in the City of Vancouver, British Columbia, prior to my residence in and travels to Bella Coola.

I chose Bella Coola, the home of the Nuxalk (pronounced *new hulk*) Nation, as my field site after spending the summer of 1994 trying to understand the various relationships between First Nations¹ Northwest Coast art and the Western art market system of galleries, auction houses, and museums in Vancouver. My attention was initially drawn to these entanglements when a cooperative of Nuxalk artists from Bella Coola held an exhibition of their artwork at the Harrington Art Gallery in Vancouver in May 1994. The exhibition was entitled Valley of Thunder: Art of the Nuxalk Nation from Bella Coola, BC, and it was billed as constituting the first time a Northwest Coast tribal group had collectively chosen to display their art under the banner of nationhood. What intrigued me most about this was the fact that the nation was Nuxalk, a group whose material culture had been severely underrepresented in the many art galleries I visited in Vancouver. Even the older name for Nuxalk, Bella Coola, was rare in this venue. In response to my questions most art gallery owners informed me that, of all the nations of the Northwest Coast, the Nuxalk of Bella Coola was the only one not experiencing a cultural revival. With my interest piqued, I decided that a trip to Bella Coola was the only way to get to the heart of the matter.

I spent the following summer of 1995 in Bella Coola and was amazed to find a place filled with artists producing a startlingly broad array of art objects, from carved masks, paintings, and silk-screened prints to silver and gold jewellery, beaded hair barrettes, and T-shirts. I quickly realized that the Nuxalk were indeed experiencing a cultural revival, yet very few of the art objects being made were reaching Vancouver and a non-Native art clientele.

I probed further and discovered that the primary reason for the lack of Nuxalk art on display and for sale in Vancouver was the presence of a significant, but diffused, pressure placed upon local Nuxalk artists not to sell their art outside the Bella Coola Valley. In fact, the Harrington Art Gallery exhibition had generated much controversy in Bella Coola regarding whether such important cultural materials as dance masks, button blankets,² and even paintings of supernatural spirit figures should be sold to a non-Nuxalk audience (Stainsby 1994).

Some hereditary chiefs were aghast, arguing that an art exhibit with the solitary purpose of sales and monetary profit is a desecration of Nuxalk heritage as well as a negative commentary on what it means to possess Nuxalk identity. As one artist whose work was in the exhibition told me: “They figure we’re selling our culture.” Those who held this view associated commodification with a loss of Nuxalk identity. On the other hand, some Nuxalk, including the elected chief and council, seemed encouraged by the fact that contemporary Nuxalk artists were working together as a group under the label “Nuxalk Nation” to gain recognition from outside the community (along with commercial sales). Nor were these individuals disturbed by the selling of contemporary copies of individually or family owned objects or images that might have continued spiritual significance. Ultimately, what I discovered was the existence of a diversity of opinion among the Nuxalk regarding issues related to identity, ownership, old and new ways of conceptualizing and passing on cultural property and knowledge, and the meaning and utility of commodification. Upon visiting Bella Coola and talking with various Nuxalk I quickly realized that the important question was not “Is cultural revival happening here?” but “Why is there so much anxiety revolving around issues of exposing your culture and its evident flourishing to outsider eyes?” This initial introduction to the Nuxalk Nation focused my attention on the significant concern expressed by the Nuxalk about experiencing cultural appropriation. Nuxalk discussions of their art and culture almost always seem to end up expressing a fear of theft and what is risked by selling, or even merely showing, Nuxalk art outside of Bella Coola.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Objectives

The object of *Switchbacks* is to investigate how Nuxalk art is used to negotiate identity in Bella Coola. It is my premise that, among the Nuxalk, artists play a crucial role in cultural revival and the production of contemporary Nuxalk national identity. Through their art Native artists mediate the differing agendas of political leaders, everyday Nuxalk art consumers, and scholars. Paradoxically, although contemporary art is crucial to the Nuxalk, most gallery owners in Vancouver, Victoria, and Seattle are not aware that it exists. This is in part due to non-Native scholars who view contemporary

Nuxalk art as inferior and of little value when compared to older, supposedly “aesthetically superior,” examples residing in museums. Yet, Bella Coola is rich in Native art production.

There is a lingering scholarly belief that material collected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and housed in Western museums represents the pinnacle of Northwest Coast art because it is used as the standard by which traditionalism in Native art is judged (King 1986, 70). Traditional art-historical analysis plots art styles on a bell curve of innovative nascence, classical apex, and decadent and static *dénouement*. Meyer Schapiro labels this the “organic conception of style” that “attributes to art a recurrent cycle of childhood, maturity, and old age, which coincides with the rise, maturity, and decline of the culture as a whole” (Schapiro 1953, 296).

Nineteenth-century cultural evolutionists tended to designate as “corrupt” or “degenerate” any non-Western art that displayed change from a so-labelled “traditional” or “authentic” culture. Thus non-Western art that displayed a hybridity of design by incorporating both Native and non-Native styles or media, and that was made to sell in an external market, was treated as inferior and as evidence of the culture’s decline as a whole (Ettawageshik 1999, 28; Phillips 1998, 18). Ruth Phillips summarizes the problem: “In consequence, change has been represented as a decline from authenticity rather than as a dynamic and progressive development, as it is asserted to be in the narratives of Western art history and other ‘great traditions’” (Phillips 1998, 168).

Anthropologists inadvertently retain the residues of this cultural evolutionist thinking combined with art history’s ideals of what constitutes a “pure” aesthetic style, with the result that First Nations get weighed down by this almost invisible classification system. Following these evolutionist models leads to quality judgments that relegate contemporary Native art to a lower-level niche than that occupied by older Native art, thus adversely affecting the appreciation and recognition of contemporary Nuxalk art.

However, I see no reason to assume that art styles develop in an orderly progression towards a pinnacle. Nor do I assume that objects made for sale deserve to be rejected as inauthentic. My project in part considers why there is such a wide discrepancy between Native and non-Native perceptions of Nuxalk art. Specifically, I investigate how art gains cultural currency with certain people in certain places and times. This requires examining art production, use, and education from the vantage point of the present-day Nuxalk rather than from a scholarly constructed past.

Art and Identity Construction: Art as Argument

As many anthropologists have concluded, art represents identity, both individual and national. Many have written about the art of the Northwest Coast as property (objects) that tells us about the ownership of clan names,

land, resources, responsibilities, and/or honours (e.g., see Boas 1955; Codere 1966; Halpin 1994; Suttles 1991). Although I view this interpretation of the function of Northwest Coast art as important and valuable, this is not the focus of *Switchbacks*, which, rather, rests upon the idea that art is not principally about objects but about actions (Gell 1998). As a result of my research I have come to think of “art” as a verb. If we accept this definition, I believe we gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what art can do. “Art as argument” is what Charlotte Townsend-Gault (1997) calls this kind of cultural production.

Art as argument is both a process and an invitation to engage in dialogue. As such, it both taunts and intrigues; harangues and incites reaction; incurs apology and, perhaps most important, brings recognition. Yet art also feints when it represents. It is both tangible and intangible, alienable and inalienable (Weiner 1992). Its power is its ability to walk this line of uncertainty, and this line of uncertainty – this ability to be never all/never nothing, always shifting – is its strength. For this reason it cannot be pinned down, no matter how hard people try to do so. Labels of national art styles (Macnair, Hoover, and Neary 1984) or names of components such as “ovoid” or “formline” (Boas 1955; Holm 1965) do not do it justice. Such terms, which describe a predictable, unifying, static form, cannot capture and make still the movement of art. The power of art lies in this shifting quality, which allows it to be many things to many different people. First Nations Northwest Coast art’s strength is its ability to be meaningful yet never totally known (Halpin 1994; McLennon and Duffek 2000, 9). The argument will never be resolved. Art opens the door to a place of entanglement (Clifford 1997; Thomas 1991; Ostrowitz 1999) and transformation (McLennon and Duffek 2000).

Western and Nuxalk Art Worlds

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 35) wrote: “The work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art.” For the purposes of this book, I consciously and strategically define art as that which the Nuxalk believe to be art. This perspective gives agency to the Nuxalk, enabling them to define their own art world. However, this act of Nuxalk empowerment is vulnerable to external definitions of authentic Native art. Inspired by Bourdieu’s ideas on the “field of cultural production,” in which he examines not only production and its end result, the art object, but also the art object as a category of art within the processes of production, circulation, and consumption, Nuxalk art must be examined within the fields in which it circulates (Marcus and Myers 1995; Myers 2001b; Phillips and Steiner 1999).

I believe that, although Nuxalk artists struggle to self-define the value of their artistic production within Bella Coola, they must recognize the legiti-

macy that their art garners when it is valued by the Western art worlds of Canada, the United States, and Europe. Philosophers of art, such as Arthur Danto (1988) and George Dickie (1989), crucially explicate how art is given value in the Western art world only when it is recognized as such by museum curators, gallery owners, and connoisseur art buyers. Nuxalk artists attempt to refute external definitions of what Nuxalk art should be but, at the same time, are aware of how inherently enmeshed their art is with outsider expectations. I see this as a crucial ambivalence manifested by Nuxalk artists – an insider/outsider dichotomy that creates contemporary Nuxalk identity.

Nuxalk artists' denial of being affected by the Western art world is not so very different from Western artists' often stated desire to avoid the impact of the Western art world. Bourdieu (1993) pointed out this ambivalence for Western artists who deny a pecuniary motivation for the production of their art when, in fact, they are involved in the sale of that art and when art gallery owners play a large role in influencing what is considered art. The Nuxalk refute external values being placed on their art via the finances of the art world and fair market value, but they also play into these valuations. In this way Nuxalk can claim to be defining their own art form while, at the same time, gaining from its external validation.

Bourdieu (1993) believes that “the pure theory of art,” which claims that true art is created without pecuniary incentive and outside the money economy, actually stems from art created as a commodity for profit within a money economy. He shows, however ironically, that a disinterestedness in money is profitable for artists. Bourdieu refers to the “field of cultural production” as an inversion of the regular money economy. Specifically, art's value in terms of “symbolic capital” is a metaphor of how art becomes valued within subjective, institutionalized structures that determine legitimacy. These structures are mediated by the way in which previous artists and gallery owners have positioned themselves within them and how their actions shape future art production. For example, Western artists' fame accrues profit and is encoded in recognizable names and signatures, which are in turn validated by Western art institutions. In this way, art both reflects already existing beliefs about legitimate value and becomes part of the process of value making. For this reason, as I asserted above, art can be viewed as a verb as well as a noun.

This description of Western individual artists is applicable to Native artists, although the latter may gain notoriety through their indigenous national status as well as through their individual status. Nuxalk artists must deal on both fronts: that of the Western art market (which values Nuxalk artists according to Western standards) and that of the Bella Coola Valley (which values Nuxalk artists according to local standards, perhaps as representatives of Nuxalk national identity) (Grabum 1993).

It is under these anxiety-producing conditions that Bourdieu's theory affects contemporary Nuxalk artists. It is due to this need to refute profit as the motivation for artistic production that Native artists in general have an uneasy relationship with selling their art. In the minds of the non-Native public and the Nuxalk themselves, who value the spiritual side of Nuxalk art, selling Nuxalk art (which is seen as commodifying Nuxalk cultural heritage) can easily be read as a negative act. Nuxalk artists must balance both the art world's general contempt for artists who produce for sale and the more specific contempt of Native artists who, in order to be appreciated as "authentic," are not supposed to profit from their spirituality. According to Phillips and Steiner (1999, 9): "Rather, until recently, both art historians and anthropologists have resoundingly rejected most commoditized objects as spurious on two grounds: (1) stylistic hybridity, which conflicts with essentialist notions of the relationship between style and culture, and (2) their production for an external art market, which conflicts with widespread notions of authenticity."

In *Switchbacks* I attempt to show the difficulties Nuxalk artists face when commodification is assumed to be a detrimental act that steals contemporary Nuxalk identity. Even though the Nuxalk have, in part, absorbed negative feelings about selling their art outside the Bella Coola Valley, they do get something positive (other than dollars) from doing so. When non-Nuxalk buy their art the Nuxalk receive recognition of its positive value, and this functions to legitimize not only what they produce but who they are. Bourdieu (1984, 291; 1990, 141) might read this as Nuxalk "symbolic capital" (honour, respectability, charisma, authority, legitimacy) produced through commodifying Nuxalk art.

Interpreting art as a process (Cruikshank 1995; Gell 1998; Halpin 1994; Jackson 1989, 1995; Jonaitis and Inglis 1994; McLennon and Duffek 2000; Morphy 1995; Myers 1994, 1995, 2001a; Thomas 1991, 1996) rather than as an object allows me to bring into focus not only the contesting forces and values that go into making art objects but also the contesting forces that derive *from* art once it has come into existence. For the Nuxalk, the significant function of art has always been to shape social identity and to construct culture rather than to produce an end product (i.e., the art object). The art object is always replaceable, but the act of art production is not. Therefore, the interpretation of "art as verb" reflects what I believe to be Nuxalk perspectives. The classical anthropological view of an art object is that it has a fixed meaning that can be revealed through scholarship (Boas 1955; Duff 1981; Lévi-Strauss 1982; Stott 1975). However, there is ample evidence that, in Bella Coola, art objects represent contested values and offer multiple interpretations.

Literary critic Stephen Greenblatt (1989, 12) writes: "The work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped

with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices [of society]. In order to achieve the negotiation, artists need to create a currency that is valid for a meaningful, mutually profitable exchange." It is this "currency" that I explore: How has value developed in Nuxalk art? When and how does Nuxalk art come to be considered and valued as "Nuxalk art?" How does Nuxalk art influence art consciousness (the Native awareness of art) and art practice (the creation and everyday use of art) in Bella Coola? I examine the relationships among the forces that negotiate legitimacy both inside and outside Bella Coola.

Control over the display and reproduction of Nuxalk art has become as important as the historical content of that art. For the Nuxalk, there are two significant aspects of Native art: (1) its material existence in Bella Coola after years of external pressures to eradicate Native art production and to remove what remains to Western museums and (2) Nuxalk ownership of art and non-Nuxalk recognition of this ownership. Nuxalk art's dual contemporary roles reside in its being viewed as cultural patrimony and national property (Handler 1986, 1988; Handler and Linnekin 1984).

It is important to emphasize that the Nuxalk ascribe vital meaning to the process of art production and to its subsequent utilization by owners rather than to the iconography and style of art, which was previously stressed by scholars. Anthropologist Franz Boas' emphasis on crest analysis as the key to understanding the role of Northwest Coast art no longer seems to apply (Boas 1955; Halpin 1994). For example, in the summer of 1995 I witnessed the production of a number of button blankets for a family hosting a potlatch. The maker recognized the need for each family member to have a button blanket or vest to wear but did not seem overly concerned with the actual design employed. She saved the cost of having an artist create new crest designs for her by, instead, using designs made available to her for free. It was fine with her that they were all the same and that they did not represent the individual wearer, as had previously been the function of button blankets. The emphasis seemed more on ensuring the production of these blankets and vests in time for the family event than on any specific animal depicted (in this case a killer whale) or the origin story that traditionally had validated this crest animal. This is not a denial of the importance of the family crest in general but, rather, a recognition that there has been a subtle shift away from the crest's specifics and towards the crest's presence.

Of course there are shared ideas among the Nuxalk about what constitutes Nuxalk art styles and typical Nuxalk art forms. Families do maintain certain crests as their own, and it would be an insult for one family to appropriate the specific crest design of another family. But my point here is to avoid continuing to define the authentic Nuxalk art form from the outside – as many scholars have done in the past (Boas 1955; Macnair, Hoover, and Neary 1984; Stott 1975). This emphasis on continuity and exact replication

appears to me to be more of a Western than a Nuxalk obsession. Certainly some Nuxalk artists are aware of the styles that have typically been considered part of the Nuxalk stylistic canon – convex, bulging faces; leaf-shaped eye orbits; exuberant colouring; an emphasis on transformation (Macnair, Hoover, and Neary 1984); and a preference for a specific shade of blue (Holm 1965). My argument does not contradict these traditions but, rather, suggests that the Nuxalk do not cling to them as tightly as outsiders might wish. The Nuxalk, while being aware of past stylistic traditions, are not concerned with mindless repetition. I believe that their main concerns are focused on having art (both old and new) in Bella Coola and on making sure that everyone knows that this art is collectively owned by the Nuxalk Nation. This self-presentation asserts Nuxalk control not only over the art objects but also over Nuxalk heritage and identity; however, it is necessary to have an audience to witness these claims. This, rather than some stylistic, formal definition created by academics concerned with master paradigms, is the crucial function of art in Bella Coola today.

Cultural Appropriation

In spite of their nonchalance with regard to Western academic definitions of Nuxalk art, the Nuxalk are intimately aware of their entanglement with the West and are working to extricate themselves from it. My research comes at a time when accusations of cultural appropriation are commonly heard in British Columbia (Doxtator 1996; gii-dahl-guud-sliiaay 1995; Keeshig-Tobias 1997; Todd 1990; Townsend-Gault 1991, 1995). Voiced by First Nations leaders, artists, and students, British Columbians often hear about Native fears of having been robbed. This is reflected in political issues such as land claims and treaty negotiations; newspaper, radio, and television stories; art exhibits; and stage plays. A general anger over the history of interaction between First Nations and Euro-Canadians is palpable (see Chapter 2).

The exchange between Native and non-Native peoples often includes the accusation of theft. As the Nuxalk recollect how their own history intertwines with colonial and Canadian histories they articulate their anger relating to theft. Many Nuxalk actively voice their opinion of the injustice inherent in museum collecting. (For a discussion of the history of museum collecting and its effects on Native culture, see Chapter 2 and Berlo 1992; Cole 1985, 1991; Dominguez 1986; Doxtator 1996; gii-dahl-guud-sliiaay 1995; Jonaitis and Inglis 1994; Townsend-Gault 1991, 1995.) Each Nuxalk visit to a museum in British Columbia brings not only respect for their ancestors' artistic skills and creativity but also the feeling of having been exploited. The Nuxalk are consciously uncomfortable with their objects' being located in Western museums, whose origins lie in their role of justifying colonialism and imperial expansion.

I think that the accusations of “theft” directed at the British Columbian and Canadian governments, which took land and material objects from Native peoples, is a demand for self-determination and control. Except for one significant exception, to be discussed in Chapter 5, instead of demanding the repatriation of objects to Bella Coola, the Nuxalk are reclaiming their cultural heritage by actively producing contemporary Nuxalk art. I label this an act of “figurative repatriation” because, through declaring that they have been the victims of theft, the Nuxalk are actively reclaiming what they possess as a nation. In the same way that Nuxalk political leaders fight for the return of their land and resources, Nuxalk artists fight for the right to express cultural knowledge and to control the construction of Nuxalk national identity. Each interaction between artist and art possessor involves a negotiation of this identity. In this context art becomes a cultural commodity (Bourdieu 1984; Haug 1986; Miller 1995; Sahlins 1988) and artists become the bearers of the past for the benefit of the future – an enormous responsibility.

Nuxalk artists represent their culture to the non-Native world in a contested field in which political leaders (both elected chiefs and hereditary chiefs) try to control artistic production. Nuxalk chiefs attempt to influence which stories artists may depict, whose crests they may draw, and the audience to which they may sell or give their art. They do this through the respect engendered by their position, through gossip and public censorship, and through the powers derived from the control of provincial and federal funds. Furthermore, political leaders objectify aspects of their collectively owned culture in order to use them as lobbying chips in dealings with provincial and federal politicians. Political leaders weigh the benefits of cultural exposure against the benefits of secrecy. On the one hand, elected chiefs pressure artists to make their work the basis of economic growth and profit through tourist art, and they advocate the exhibition of Nuxalk art and the sharing of Nuxalk cultural knowledge; on the other hand, hereditary chiefs fear the “cultural prostitution” that results from selling Nuxalk art to non-Native people outside Bella Coola.

A poignant example of this fear of cultural prostitution occurred in 1994, when the Nuxalk government refused a provincial grant to build an ocean-going canoe that would have been used in the welcoming ceremonies of the Commonwealth Games in Victoria (the capital of British Columbia). The acceptance of this grant would have provided an opportunity for cultural expression and the preservation of traditional skills. However, it would also have put Nuxalk culture on display outside of Bella Coola, raising fears of commercialization and exploitation, and it could have been seen as an endorsement of the provincial government. Ironically, a project designed to strengthen pride in Nuxalk national identity was cancelled in order to

preserve and retain Nuxalk sovereignty. This example illustrates the dilemma of Nuxalk artistic production and highlights the complex relationship between cultural education, commercialization, and politics.

Contemporary Nuxalk wish to assert their right to define themselves and to control the images that represent them. I argue that this struggle is negotiated through, and can be seen in, the work of Nuxalk artists. Thus, the creation of art in Bella Coola can be read as a political statement (Thomas 1995) in that it is an act of identity construction. I further argue that art as identity construction is an invitation to dialogue (McLennon and Duffek 2000, 9) because identities are never constructed in a vacuum: they must be recognized and validated by others.

Bella Coola: Getting There

There are many paths to Bella Coola. All are indirect, and, in a way, this indirection, along with the arduousness of the physical trip to Bella Coola, bears a close, and perhaps an anticipatory, relationship to the psychological journey – at least for an outsider like myself: a Jewish anthropologist from New York City. Bella Coola can be reached by plane, ferry, or car. From Vancouver, the most populous city in British Columbia (Canada's westernmost province), it is an eight-hour drive through the Fraser Canyon and along the Thompson River to Williams Lake, Bella Coola's nearest city. On the second day of the journey, there is still another five to six hours of driving ahead. One heads west across the Chilcotin – British Columbia's "cowboy country" – which is filled with cattle ranches and people with independent spirits.³ The dirt and gravel road is often lined with split-log fences, and every now and then one has to slow down to rattle over a cattle guard or to avoid a cow that seems in no rush to get out of the way. On the road one is passed by hardy, dirt-caked four-by-four Ford trucks or by lengthy logging trucks bringing wood to sawmills and pulp mills around the province. The road is often unlined, and, when passing an oncoming vehicle, you often find yourself hoping there is enough space to squeeze by. Every sixty kilometres or so there is a tiny town, basically a gas station with a cafe doubling as a convenience store. The cafe's decor is rugged: exposed wood with a frontier motif, sometimes with gingham curtains if someone has bothered to make the effort.

After about four hours of driving west, the road becomes paved again, and you realize how bumpy it had been when, suddenly, you feel as though your car is moving like a hot knife through butter.⁴ This is when you know you are almost at Anahim Lake, the last town before Tweedsmuir Provincial Park and the descent into the Bella Coola Valley. At this point, if you happen to live in Bella Coola, you know that in less than two hours you will be home. After leaving this tiny town, you are soon back on dirt roads, which seem to meander in ways that suggest the surveyor was either drunk or

admitting defeat before the larger forces of nature. A straight road will suddenly hairpin turn without warning; fun in springtime, but potentially deadly when icy and snowy in winter. The Plateau, as this area is called, is high up in the mountains (5,000+ feet), which ensures that the snow remains for three-quarters of the year. Hopefully, you leave Williams Lake early enough to avoid the setting sun; otherwise, you find yourself driving into a giant red ball, which virtually blinds you to any oncoming traffic. Once you have traversed the Plateau, you are ready to make the steep and treacherous descent into Bella Coola, which lies below sea level, nestled in a valley near the coast.⁵

The Hill

You find yourself in front of a wide area on the road where a large sign warns you that you are entering a potentially dangerous area of steep inclines and should stop and put on your tire chains. You are given space at the side of the road to perform this feat, and you hope you remembered your gloves. It could be April and spring-like in Vancouver, but here there might be three feet of snow. The sign also warns trucks to check their brakes. There is a metal barrier painted yellow, which has the potential to close the road to traffic due to unusually dangerous conditions, such as ice, fog, or avalanche. And then there are the potholes. Potholes in the Chilcotin can be so deep locals joke that a whole truck can disappear into one. You hope the grader has come by recently. If the barrier is up, you are now going to have to navigate “the hill” and its innumerable switchbacks.

The road here is compacted gravel and lacks a railing along its edge. Some visitors prefer to get out and walk at this point, although locals scoff at their fear. “What is there to be afraid of?” they muse. Depending on your speed and confidence level, driving the hill can take anywhere from twenty-five minutes to an hour. You hope you do not meet an oncoming car at a place in the road where there just doesn’t seem to be enough space for two vehicles to coexist. Some hairpin turns occur around interior rock, making it impossible to see oncoming cars. Honking to alert those around the corner seems advisable, although only tourists, as they creep along, bother to do so.

The switchbacks get steeper and steeper, with the steepest one reaching a grade of eighteen degrees. Trucks have been known to fall off the road at this point. There are avalanche-warning signs everywhere at spots where one can see trees and debris that have fallen before. Everyone in Bella Coola has stories of flat tires, long waits for aid, and icy conditions. Miraculously, however, only a handful of people have been killed by avalanches or car accidents since the road was carved out of the steep cliff by local residents between 1952 and 1953 (Kopas 1970; Wild 2004).

Bella Coolans are proud of the difficulty of reaching their valley – a valley walled in by 6,000-foot snow-capped mountains. This valley was cut over

time by the flowing waters of the Bella Coola River, which reaches an estuary at the point of the town of Bella Coola, an hour's drive from the hill. Although it is never articulated, you realize that the difficulty of navigating the hill accentuates the power of the place that is Bella Coola. Only the hardy and brave are rewarded with the sight of the Bella Coola River, home of the oolichan⁶ in April and the salmon in spring and summer, the nesting site of bald eagles, and the place where hungry brown and black bears, who emerge from their mountain dens in spring, come to fish.

The hill is never a boring topic for local Nuxalk: overheating radiators; silly tourists too frightened to drive down the hill in their campers, who needed to be helped; and stories of trips "out" to Williams Lake are told again and again, with memorable ones reiterated often. Such tales are likely to centre upon: how fast the dirt roads were navigated, a time when a moose was hit and meat for winter was provided, and who you met and picked up on the way. The landscape is not mere background for the lives of people in Bella Coola: it shapes their very existence and makes them proud of their identity.

In addition, Bella Coolans like to hear that you, as an outsider, a visitor, were frightened coming down the hill. In this way their bravery is doubly emphasized and your outsider status is marked. Familiarity with the hill becomes a recognition of ownership – a major theme of this research – ownership of the space between the valley's mountains. And yet not all things Nuxalk are owned in such an unambiguous way as are stories of the hill. As I spent more and more time in Bella Coola, interacting with Nuxalk people, I began to notice the ambivalence and anxiety lurking below the surface. This anxiety appears in relation to Nuxalk identity formation *as a nation*, one of the initial aspects of that 1994 Vancouver Nuxalk art exhibition that first prompted me to make the fearful journey down the road of switchbacks into the Bella Coola Valley. Throughout this work I contend that a battle is being waged on two fronts: (1) between Nuxalk in Bella Coola and non-Native people outside of the valley with regard to recognition of Nuxalk national identity and control of Nuxalk cultural patrimony, and (2) and no less important, *within* the valley among Nuxalk individuals themselves, also in regard to the same two issues mentioned in (1).

Switchbacks

Over time, I became more and more intrigued by the dialectic involved in identity formation in Bella Coola. Nuxalk identity formation is not a one-sided process that occurs in isolation from the outside world; rather, it involves a series of switchbacks. I have described the hill's terrain so explicitly because it affords the reader not only a backdrop for understanding the environment of the Nuxalk Nation but also because it functions as a territo-

rial trope. Just as Crisca Bierwert (1999) offers “the figure” of the river in all its changing, flowing movement as a useful metaphor for discussing Coast Salish ways of knowing, so I use the metaphor of the hill and its switchbacks to reflect contemporary Nuxalk methods of identity construction. The Nuxalk move between essentialist categories of modern and traditional, Western and “Indian,” just as travellers on a switchback move from left to right but never stay in one place. The Nuxalk oscillate between the historical and the contemporary, between culture with a capital C invented by anthropologists (Keesing 1994; Kuper 1999) and between postmodern culture, which is always in process (Clifford 1991).⁷ This movement can cause anxiety, just as travelling the hill causes moments of hesitation, fear, and loss of direction; and yet the Nuxalk do move towards their goal of creating a strong, cohesive Nuxalk identity. The metaphor of the hill and its switchbacks allows for both this movement and a feeling of being trapped in a dangerous space where choices are limited. The Nuxalk are working to sustain a viable national identity in a postcolonial world. Their anxiety about this is reflected in the pages that follow.

I am suggesting that the physical landscape and the cultural landscape converge. Just as visitors to the valley, frightened of traversing the hill, reinforce a Nuxalk sense of self, so non-Nuxalk outsiders, who are in a kind of switchback relationship with the Nuxalk, are able to create a sense of Nuxalk ownership with regard to their identity and culture. This process was noted by some Nuxalk themselves. As one Nuxalk woman told me when discussing tourists coming to the Bella Coola Valley, “It takes outsiders to see wealth.” She was referring to the bounty and beauty of the Bella Coola Valley itself, which most occupants take for granted. People only seemed to recognize the special qualities of their place when they encountered the reactions of others – for example, when visiting campers, hikers, and other tourists told of how surprised they were when everyone they passed on the road waved to them as they drove by. This simple but unexpected gesture is called the Bella Coola wave, or the Bella Coola hello. You raise one or two fingers of the hand on your steering wheel at every passing vehicle, whether you know the occupants or not. If you fail to do so, you will meet with criticism in the local co-op supermarket, something to the effect of: “Snob, didn’t you see me waving?” While tourists register pleasant surprise at this custom, more revealing is the fact that *local* residents place considerable importance on outsiders’ positive reactions to them and their community. This suggests that it is important to valley residents to see themselves through visitors’ eyes, and this vision is a good one – one that recognizes value. I highlight this point as it is crucial later on. One of the central theses of *Switchbacks* is that, for the Nuxalk, external recognition is needed if they are to truly appreciate their own natural and cultural environment.

Outsider Access

Another reason I begin with stories of the hill is that they emphasize the serpentine route, sometimes dangerous, sometimes beautiful, that guides my journey towards an understanding of Bella Coola and Nuxalk culture. There is nothing easy about gaining access to Bella Coola, its people, and its ways. As an anthropologist and outsider I am marked as a tourist, someone who brings both positive and negative things to the valley. In terms of the positive, I am the awed and appreciative admirer of the valley's elegant scenery and different way of life, at least from the perspective of Vancouver and New York City. When I go to Bella Coola I bring cash (something always needed in this poor community). During my stay I become somewhat analogous to a "daughter" in the sense that I must be guided, cared for, and fed. In terms of the negative, I am seen as someone who imposes her own priorities upon this place and its residents – a potential liability given the nature of my reasons for going to Bella Coola in the first place.

Part of being an anthropologist is wanting to turn a strange place into a familiar place, where one can say one now belongs. Yet there is a danger, an audaciousness, in believing that one can truly break through the outer shell of Nuxalk culture, where the Nuxalk display what they own and who they are for touristic, outsider pleasures. Clifford Geertz (2000, 33) has written eloquently about the "ethically ambiguous character" of fieldwork and the difficulty of maintaining relations that are both "engaged" and "analytic": "The anthropologist inevitably remains more alien than he desires and less cerebral than he imagines" (40). My concerns and experiences certainly parallel those of many other anthropologists who have come before me and who will follow afterwards.

The risk in the minds of the Nuxalk is in what the anthropologist or tourist can take away, or "steal," in the local idiom. Not only can the outsider afford to buy Nuxalk art – masks, plaques, jewellery – when in fact many Nuxalk cannot, but the outsider's presence can dilute Nuxalk culture. This was related to me by a Nuxalk woman who explained that "tourists bring access to outside ways, allowing Nuxalk children to understand a bit of what life might be like outside the valley, but tourists also bring roads, which can lead children away." From this typical Nuxalk perspective, the tourist's (or the anthropologist's) presence is seen as a threat. I would add, however, that roads go two ways: they can take children and art out of the valley, but they can also facilitate an easy return.

Taking That Which Is Not Freely Given: Doing Fieldwork in Bella Coola

Writing about Bella Coola and the people that inhabit its valley is problematic. The anthropologist as producer of ethnographic text has long been a concern of reflexive anthropology (Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986).

The interweaving of representation and power must be acknowledged. I know that people in Bella Coola are very cautious upon learning that they will be written about. Indeed, such hesitancy was what usually greeted me upon posing questions, and it could mean many things. For example, hesitation could indicate a desire to carefully plan what one was about to say so as not to be misunderstood, or it could be employed as a device to unsettle the questioner. In other instances a pause might be used to stop oneself from saying what it was not one's right to say, or it could provide the speaker with a moment to evaluate the intentions of the person who had asked the question. There were no simple questions in Bella Coola. Everything from "Why use alder wood when smoke-drying cut salmon?" to "How did the 'Mask, Dance and Song' curriculum at the local band school develop?" evoked this hesitancy. I believe that all the pauses and hesitations I encountered resulted from a fear of saying the wrong thing and thus opening oneself to attack. Many in Bella Coola have retreated behind closed doors so as not to be forced to answer a question that might require a politically sensitive response.

People in Bella Coola speak as if they would like to excise politics from their lives. For example, when asked whether they like a certain cultural arts teacher or whether they will attend a potlatch, people would often answer (after pausing) by saying, "I don't get involved in politics." End of conversation. Their reticence is understandable. Their avoidance is a way of trying to stop the pain brought on by too many questions, and not just those being asked by outside researchers.⁸ Related to this urgency to circumvent politics and local alliances is a tendency for many Nuxalk to involve themselves in neutral community activities such as intergenerational basketball or Bingo, while others just stay home.⁹

Anxiety about Politics

Much anxiety revolves around the issue of local political divisions within Bella Coola and the Nuxalk Nation. Many speak quietly about the divide in Bella Coola between the elected band chief and the hereditary chiefs. The elected chief is in a position of leadership designed by the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs (DIA).¹⁰ The DIA instituted a system of band government based on democratic elections. The elected band chief has a council of twelve elected band councillors who distribute monies given by the DIA and thus decide how health, housing, and education issues will be dealt with in the community. The Bella Coola band system was set up in 1952, ostensibly to replace the antiquated Indian agents, who were non-Native representatives of the DIA. However, the DIA maintained a non-Native "superintendent," or "district manager/supervisor" in residence in Bella Coola until 1979. Formerly, the Indian agent had ruled local reserve life, and any interaction with the DIA or the nation of Canada had been conducted through him.¹¹

The hereditary chiefs are the traditional chiefs of individual families who inherit the right to lead their extended family. These are usually elders who have now taken on the responsibility of collectively guiding the Nuxalk Nation. In Bella Coola today there are approximately sixteen traditional chiefs representing individual families. The hereditary chiefs envision their role as one mandated by the elders to protect Nuxalk land and resources from further misuse and to guide the Nuxalk Nation spiritually. They call themselves “traditionalists” or “sovereignists.”

When I was in Bella Coola in 1997 the elected chief and council were trying to work with logging companies to gain employment for the Nuxalk community. The hereditary chiefs, on the other hand, opposed logging companies entering the valley at all and supported the presence of Greenpeace and an environmental group called the Forest Action Network, who wanted to save an area of land that they referred to as the Great Bear Rain Forest.

Although prior to my fieldwork a hereditary chief had been elected band chief, this was not the case when I was in residence in 1997. Interestingly, in the recent past family members of the elected chief had worked to have him made a hereditary chief, but there was still controversy over whether he had received the hereditary chieftainship under proper circumstances. Also, some felt that the elected chief was only a puppet of the DIA, while others felt that the Nuxalk had to coalesce around this modern form of government rather than remain in the past. Many in Bella Coola were loath to say which side they supported for fear of being ostracized by the other. Most people had family members on both sides, and major fissures were opening between the generations and among siblings. Overall, tensions were extremely high. This division between the elected chief and the hereditary chiefs was festering at the time I conducted my fieldwork, and it continues today.¹²

In general, Nuxalk people do not like controversy or being at odds with their neighbours, and for this reason very few of them will contradict an opinion with which they do not agree; instead, they will refuse to communicate – a response that says, “We have no common ground,” or “Danger, we are about to disagree.” Nor are people likely to declare their opinions in any public venue, all of which makes being an anthropologist in Bella Coola tricky business. Not only is it difficult to conduct interviews, but the very act of eliciting information labels one as political and, therefore, potentially harmful.

While I do not wish to present the Nuxalk as provincial and unsophisticated (which they are not),¹³ within the confines of their small community it is known that secrets are hard to keep. Although the Nuxalk are not limited by local mentalities they *are* limited by the fact that their numbers and the size of their main reserve are small enough to produce an environment within which knowledge is both at a premium and dangerous. In sum, too

much information in such a small community can be detrimental to one's mental health and well-being.

Shortly after I began fieldwork it became apparent that the value of words was stronger than I had imagined. My own culture taught me that "opinions are free," but in Bella Coola giving your opinion implied a deep trust in the person who elicited it. Acceptance of my own right to pose questions was calculated. And yet so much hinged on getting a response, an answer. The choice of *not* answering was always in the equation between the Nuxalk and myself. Silence was always their right – a silence that might mean not only a refusal to participate but also negative feelings about my question or even about myself. It was always difficult to discern what was meant. Silence is power in Bella Coola – a refusal to participate – in the same way that not showing up at a potlatch implies censure of the business conducted there or a negative judgment of the people hosting it.

The Nuxalk I met were very hesitant to express negative judgments. If someone spoke, it was almost always in a supportive vein. The most a Nuxalk person would do was *describe* a behaviour they deemed negative, and through this description, perhaps through tone of voice, imply a critique. When I spoke of a person in the community an informant did not like, I often heard, "I don't involve myself with that person" or "I don't know about him/her." Statements like these implied not a lack of knowledge about that person but, rather, a refusal to be part of his/her life. Such avoidance functioned not as a criticism but as a censure – a more effective measure of disapproval (i.e., silence). Thus, the Nuxalk rarely criticize; they just remain silent. Anger, like the fear of criticism, was usually masked through avoidance. Because of this, outbursts were infrequent; however, when they did occur they had a huge impact.

This kind of language usage has both positive and negative implications. Words have a way of attaching themselves to the person towards whom they are directed. Hence, while negative statements have the power to harm those upon whom they alight, positive statements may also bestow power on an individual. For instance, when I tried my hand at things like baking bread, cutting fish, or painting Nuxalk designs in Bella Coola, I heard only compliments. Unfortunately, I was not always so lucky.

Mail is delivered to Bella Coola only three times a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Consequently, it is always an event. On these days you meet everyone you know at the local post office, and it is a time for friendly chatter. Children come on their bikes. Adults pull their trucks up to the corner and, leaving their engines running, amble into the post office to check their boxes. On one particular afternoon, as I was walking home from the post office three blocks away, I ran into a long-time Nuxalk friend of mine. I saw him almost every morning when he came for a cup of

coffee to the home of the people with whom I was living. Each morning he would be sitting on the sofa in the living room, looking out the big picture window with the rest of us as we contemplated the new day. He always had a hug for me and, with a twinkle in his eye, asked when I was going to marry him (he was divorced and had four children and many grandchildren). He was also a hereditary chief, but that rarely affected our relationship. Usually I would go sit next to him and he would poke me in the ribs trying to get my attention while I tried to crochet or drink coffee.

The day I met him on my way back from the post office, for whatever reason, he decided to ask me about my research. His questions were familiar ones. Specifically, he wanted to know what I was going to write about and who had invited me to come to live in Bella Coola in the first place. In other words, "Who gave you permission to be here?" Finally, he asked, "Aren't you going to make a lot of money when you write a book?" I had heard these questions many times before but usually from someone who did not know me as a friend. Typically, I answered that I was getting a PhD so that I could teach at university. I then explained that I was interested in Nuxalk art and how people in Bella Coola were learning about their art and, through their art, about themselves. I told my questioners the story of how I had met a number of Nuxalk artists in Vancouver and how they had challenged me, if I was truly interested in Nuxalk art and life, to come to Bella Coola to learn. And so I had come. I said I needed to write a book-sized paper but that there was no guarantee that it would get published. I invariably added that usually anthropology books did not make money. For two reasons I always tried to answer these questions calmly: first, I wanted to reassure the person questioning me that she/he had a right to do so and to know the eventual results of my work; second, I needed to reassure myself that I did, in fact, have every right to be in Bella Coola asking questions. I had, after all, been invited by the Nuxalk themselves, at least some of them.

It was in this way that I also calmly answered my friend's questions. He then changed his tactic and declared that I would make a lot of money as a university professor. This upset me because, although he continued to tell me it was not the case, I felt as though I was being attacked. He then implied that I had not been talking to the right people and suggested the names of several hereditary chiefs with whom I should speak. Although I had already tried, unsuccessfully, to speak with these chiefs, for the sake of argument I told him he was right. In the end he hugged me and invited me to come and sit with him at his house, but I was shaken. How could someone I considered a friend question me so untrustingly, as though I were suddenly a stranger?

When I related what had transpired to my adoptive Nuxalk "mom" and "dad," the same people who had introduced me to him and with whom I was living, they were angered by his behaviour. This was one of the rare

occasions when criticisms were openly levelled. My Nuxalk father encouraged me to continue with my work and to approach, once again, the elders and hereditary chiefs my friend had mentioned and ask for their help. Later that evening another hereditary chief called to say he had heard about the incident, proving once again that news and gossip travel like wildfire in this small community. Moreover, he had called to tell me that he did not think a hereditary chief had the right to speak to me as my friend had, upsetting me in the process. From his perspective, my friend had acted inappropriately as an individual; that is, he had spoken to me of “politics” without first consulting the other chiefs. The chief who called added that a meeting must be held to rectify the situation. This meeting never took place. Ultimately, although I had been criticized by one member of the community, the reassurances I received from others helped quell my worst fear – namely, that I did not have a right to be in Bella Coola asking the kinds of questions I thought I *should* ask.

I tell this story from the field in order to tangibly illustrate the points I made above regarding the dangers of question asking and becoming involved in sensitive political issues related to Nuxalk identity. I have related it both to situate myself within the cultural milieu I have been describing and to emphasize how difficult conducting fieldwork in Bella Coola can be for an anthropologist, who perhaps *should* pose difficult questions that few want to answer.

How did I deal with Nuxalk reactions of avoidance, anger, and silence? I made them the centre of my study. If information and opinion were difficult to collect because they were seen as possessions too dangerous to share with outsiders (or even certain insiders), then I decided I would look at why this was the case. I felt, and still feel, that ownership of content has become more important in Bella Coola than the content itself, a point to which I return in later chapters. It became critical for me to understand these feelings of secrecy, to explore and to understand the fear driving such actions as having an opinion but being unable to share it or owning a mask but being unwilling to dance it. This palpable fear went beyond the fear of physical theft, which was something dealt with daily on the reserve, to something less tangible but incredibly important: a fear of theft of cultural knowledge and, with it, a theft of Nuxalk identity.

Returning to my place within all of this, I have to conclude that a part of this project involved my taking something that was not freely given. Thus, my writing about Bella Coola is a theft of sorts, and for this reason I must explain my act of writing both to the Nuxalk and to myself. I am clearly guilty – but of what? Can there be a positive side to this act of theft? Is it really theft if certain knowledge was given to me freely by certain Nuxalk? Not to spin too deeply into paranoia, it must be said that many Nuxalk are very giving, providing food and shelter to the unknown anthropologist,

sharing difficult childhood memories and even adopting her into their family structure, replete with sisters, nieces, uncles, aunts, and other relations.

And yet the following thoughts are unavoidable. Writing is about establishing one's authority to speak (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Smith 1999; Trinh 1989). How should I write about my experiences of being with the Nuxalk? Ethnography creates, it does not merely describe. Given the possible effects of my writing, how can I write about the Nuxalk without in some way appropriating their voices or their right to write about themselves? I am certainly doing more than writing about myself when I put down what I did, thought, and learned while living in Bella Coola and asking questions that were, for some, impossible to answer. One way I responded to my own critique was by trying to respect the boundaries of Nuxalk ownership, even when they were not clear. I do not want to contribute to the feelings expressed by some Nuxalk that the display of their art, or even photographs of it, has the potential to reveal knowledge that belongs to the owner of the cultural object and that should stay secret. My goal is to respect the limits of representation set by the Nuxalk while also reading them as important messages about Nuxalk identity.

Even a written description of a mask or other cultural object allows an artist to make a copy. Some Nuxalk believe that duplication of Nuxalk art is theft because it dilutes the power of what the Nuxalk possess as a culture and as an identity. Since I do not wish to wrestle control away from the Nuxalk I have not included any photographs in this book. In refusing to display I am acknowledging that I do not own the inherited right to do so. Even so, I am aware that *Switchbacks* creates an access point to the Nuxalk, who are vulnerable when exposed. In order to protect individual Nuxalk from unwanted exposure I have not included any personal names in this work. The only time I use Nuxalk names is when the individual is deceased and has already been recognized in published form as an important member of the Nuxalk community. I feel it would be a slight not to mention the names of Nuxalk people who have already been publicly acclaimed. I am not entirely pleased with this solution, and I am sure it will not please all Nuxalk.

However, if art is indeed argument – the opening up of a kind of dialogue – it is my contention that it requires a response. If the only way to write a safe response is not to write at all, then I think a reply must be risked. This writing, then, is my response to the art of the Nuxalk people.

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