Klahowya Tillicum

Coming Home to the Stories and Songs of the West Coast

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Saltchuck, Skookumchuck, Slatechuck, Snass Creek,
Potlatch Creek, Kamess Creek, Alki Creek, Kalitan Creek,
Cultus Lake, Canim Lake, Waugh Lake, Wawa Lake,
Kilippi Glacier, Ipsoot Glacier, Piluk Glacier, Taghum Glacier,
Ollalla Creek, Chakchak Lake, Chikchik Bay, Chickamin Range,
Kikwili Creek, Tumtum Creek, Memaloose Creek, Klahannie Campground,
Mesachie Lake, Nanitch Lake, Till Lake, Tenas Lake,
Klootchman Canyon, Sitkum Creek, Ilahee Meadows, Tyee Spit,
Siwash Rock, Salal Island, Klahowya Lake, Tillicum Park.

These are just a few of the Chinook place names in British Columbia; and many of them identify a dozen or more other hills and valleys and rivers and lakes, like the familiar Bear Creeks and Elk Lakes and Sawtooth Mountains and Smugglers Coves of this land. Down the coast in Washington and Oregon and California, and up in Alaska, there are lots of others, names like Chumstick and Colchuk, Cosho and Coxit, Hyak and Hyas, Kahkwah and Kimtah, Katsuk and Konamox, Kulla Kulla and Muckamuck, Mowich and Mox, Tatoosh and Tamanos, identifying ten times as many places. Those of you who know some of them will recognize that they are not only on the coast. Up in the Interior—as the British Columbia place names confirm—Chinook was spoken and written and given back to the land, signalling sites of work and worship, of seasonal camps and permanent settlements, of old stories and new adventures, of mysterious riddles and powerful charms. Chinook was used in court cases and by royal commissions well into the twentieth century, and to translate speeches and facilitate negotiation in a wide range of situations, providing common currency to peoples from over a dozen language families, with hundreds of dialects, who lived and worked, hunted and fished, and tried to live together in a good way. Cannery managers on the coast had to know the language, and those who worked on the boats or in the woods of the Interior would have spoken it regularly. In Kamloops, a newspaper was published in Chinook during the 1890s in a shorthand script not unlike the one that became known as Cree syllabics. And in a late flourish, I am wearing my membership pin for the
Tillicum Club, sponsored by the Vancouver Province in the 1950s to promote children’s stories from all of the coast cultures. Shaped like a souvenir-shop totem pole, its motto is Klahowya Tillicum, which means “Greetings, friend.”

At least a dozen dictionaries were published in Chinook, and the Bible was translated by that energetic missionary organization, the British and Foreign Bible Society. “Okook kloosh yiems kopa Jesus Christ, Sahalee Tyee tenass,” begins the gospel according to St. Mark: “This is the good story of Jesus Christ, child of the chief up above.” Stories and songs in Chinook were widely performed and occasionally published, and were recorded and discussed by visitors to the region, including the formidable Franz Boas, whose dedication to the languages that give cultures their character brought anthropology down from the verandah and into the field, and helped shape the commitment to languages which characterizes my discipline, comparative literature.

Chinook has had a recent celebration in a fine book by Charles Lillard and Terry Glavin titled A Voice Great Within Us. And several scholars, including the distinguished anthropologist Horatio Hale, who had worked with Iroquoian chiefs in “reading” the wampum belts to present the history of the Haudenosaunee, saw the beginning of a complex literary tradition in Chinook. Like Hale—who late in his life published a “manual” of Chinook—Boas called Chinook a jargon, a technical language often more or less incomprehensible outside a particular craft or community. But Boas used Chinook regularly to communicate with the people of the West Coast on complex subjects, including the structure of their indigenous languages and cultures, so it must have been capable of considerable sophistication and subtlety. Others call Chinook a pidgin, a commercial “contact” language of the sort that was common in coastal communities around the world from the time of the great Portuguese trading empire, and that nourished inland commerce as well. But I share with Glavin a conviction that Chinook is best called a creole, like Jamaican or Haitian or Tok Pisin, one of the official languages of Papua New Guinea and spoken by several million people. And to those who think that Chinook was a dog’s breakfast of a language, I would mention that in the middle ages the Irish Gaelic poets, dedicated to the purity of their language and deeply opposed to linguistic miscegeny, dismissed the upstart hybrid that was English as “excremental.”

Chinook takes its name, some of its structure, and a good deal of its early words from the language of the aboriginal people of the lower Columbia River, who (among many other things) helped Lewis and Clark get through the brutally wet winter of 1805-06 when they arrived on the West Coast along the Snake River and down the Columbia. Their descendants are still trying to have their tribal status restored, opposed not only by the Indian Bureau but by other tribes who fear they may lose out.
There are some who believe that Chinook began to develop before contact; but in the form in which it has come down to us it shows significant influence from French and English as well as Chinookan, and also from Nuu-chah-nulth and several of the Coast and Interior Salish languages. Whatever the case, it facilitated trade between native groups as well as with newcomers—mutually advantageous trade, I should emphasize, for Aboriginal peoples of the West Coast had been trading for thousands of years, and were as crafty and cunning and as conscious of self-interest as anyone from anywhere. As the Coeur d’Alene writer Sherman Alexie would say, they knew not only fancydancing, but the business of fancydancing.

The region the original Chinook people called home provides an image of the region that we call the West Coast. It included the Columbia itself, the legendary “river of the west” that inspired Spanish and British explorers in the late seventeenth century until an American from Boston, Robert Gray, sailed a short distance upriver in 1792 and named the river after his ship. (Because so much ocean shipping originated in Boston, it soon became the Chinook name for any American—hence Boston Bar, where many Americans washed for gold in the 1850s). Rising high in the Rocky Mountains—where, much later, a sternwheeler named Klahowya operated for a few years from the headwaters at Canal Flats down to Golden—the Columbia is the largest river on any of the Pacific shores, with a mean flow at its mouth double that of the Nile at Aswan. Twelve-hundred miles long, its drainage area is over a quarter of a million square miles, running through two countries and the territory of over a dozen Aboriginal nations. This rich and riddling region, which includes the ocean that sweeps north and south and west to the ends of the earth and the inlets and islands on its coasts, is a place of extraordinary scale and of small delights, where remarkable independence is possible and where everything—and ultimately everyone—is connected. The Chinook language was medium and message not only of those connections but also of the line between languages and livelihoods and relationships to the land that complicated life on the West Coast. If the interdependence that Chinook embodied is a thing of the past…well, maybe it is also an idea for the future.

By the 1900s, Chinook had wide currency. Its dismissal as a pidgin or jargon or a curious relict of colonial times came quickly, and not simply because a few of its words were discredited in the grim years of social and—in the case of Aboriginal and Asian peoples—legal prejudice, but mostly because of other changes in the social and economic dynamics of the region which divided people into classes and made capital and commodities king. Some Chinook words did become expressions of contempt—in some measure, perhaps, as an indication of scorn for the idea of community that the language represented. Siwash, for an Aboriginal man, became a slur on some parts of the coast; but in the Interior it continued to be associated with surviving in difficult country through skill and stamina. The respectful Sid Marty uses it without irony in a
poem—dedicated to Al Purdy—called “Siwashing,” where he talks in local language of siwashing down a mountain on horseback through a mess of shintangle and windfall and widowmakers, the dangerously heavy limbs that would occasionally break off and fall on woodsmen. Klootchman, the female counterpart to siwash, maintained its integrity (unlike the Algonkian word “squaw”); the traditional Nuu-chah-nulth artist and writer George Clutesi used klootchman regularly, and in his widely anthologized poem “West Coast Indian,” he invokes the “killer-whale, lord of the salt-chuck,” using a Chinook word right beside one for the sperm whale, “Mah-uk,” in his Tse-shaht mother tongue, followed by a word with yet another lineage, “leviathan of the sea.”

Any talk about languages leads sooner or later to the awkward question of who’s in charge, them or us. Are we the masters of our languages, or the servants? Does language create our thoughts and feelings, or simply communicate them. Intelligent people—especially intelligent poets and philosophers—have disagreed about the answer for a very long time, and in every culture that I know of. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who were close friends and collaborators on many other matters, took opposite sides, Wordsworth being convinced that language embodied thought (language is its incarnation was his image, and he spoke of being imprisoned in language), while Coleridge believed that language merely conveyed it (as a slide-rule calculates sums, he said, liberating us). A little earlier, the eighteenth-century scholar Giambattista Vico argued that we misrepresent, or make up, much of the world in the structure of our languages; for example, he said, what a difference it would make if we thought of God as a verb rather than a noun. Rivers and oceans, too, we might add; and as for their shores…well, maybe they are adverbs or adjectives; or possibly prepositions, which Northrop Frye once said were like irrational numbers in mathematics, questioning rational categories.

This raises the question of whether language begins with words or with phrases, a question of interest well beyond linguistic and literary circles. Among other things, it turns us to the mysteries of translation, which paradoxically provides some surprising openings into a domain beyond language. In a quotation used by the Alaskan writer John Haines as the epigraph to a collection of his poems, the philosopher Martin Buber speculated on what happens after we die. “After is the wrong word,” he suggested. “It is an entirely different dimension. Time and space are crystallizations out of God.” “Puzzle me the right answer to that one,” Seamus Heaney said, quoting the fisherman blown up in a bar in his poem “Casualty.” But we have help at hand in another language close to us here on the West Coast. Nora Marks and Richard Dauenhauer, the remarkable Tlingit elder and comparative literary scholar who have done so much to illuminate the oral traditions of the West Coast from their home in Alaska, talk about the Tlingit word shuká, which defines the conditions for storytelling. Superficially it translates as “ancestor”; but when Tlingit people say “we don’t know our shuká,” they mean “we don’t know our future,” so
it’s clear that the English word “ancestor” is only a beginning. In fact, the word *shuká* turns in two directions, both spatial and temporal; but before we get all misty-eyed about the mysteries of an Aboriginal language, the Dauenhauers remind us that we have English words that do this too, words like “ahead” and “before,” which can refer both to things in the past that have gone before us or ahead of us, and things that lie ahead of us or before us in the future…as in, “she walks before me” and “it happened the day before yesterday.” There is much more to say about *shuká*—among other things, it refer to images or heraldic designs, which give performances their legitimacy and credibility—but it is enough to know that it comes to rest somewhere in that domain between here and nowhere, now and never, where stories take place, and that we can sometimes be released from the bounds of one language—even as we recognize its possibilities—when we enter another…which in turn, Nora and Richard would be the first to say, will impose its own limitations on us. Which makes the West Coast a wonderful arena for the understanding of languages and literatures.

Franz Boas set the stage for this discussion in modern times—and just at the time Chinook was flourishing—by insisting that language shapes the way we live and move and have our being, including the way we relate to other people and things, both natural and supernatural. His work inspired linguistic relativists like Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, who argued for the cognitive as well as the cultural determinisms of language, while universalists like Max Black and Noam Chomsky proposed that we are all similarly coded.

The argument was there too, and became a modern preoccupation, in the ways people defined identity, by blood (over which we have no control) or by allegiance (which we choose), and this in turn recalled an ancient dialogue between two concepts of community, as an organic entity to which we belong, willy-nilly (like our family) or as a chosen people; or as an organized group which we choose to join, like a neighbourhood or (in one of its guises) a nation. How we think—and speak of—home and country depends a lot on which side we take, and that in turn influences how we understand the expression of collective identity in literature.

T.S. Eliot tried to find a balance in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” shuttling between the imperatives of tradition and the innovations of individuals; but the question remains very much alive when we deal with languages as different as Mandarin and Spanish or Athapaskan and English—as is the case on the West Coast—and with the significantly different notions of authority and intention that their literatures sponsor. This is not a trivial matter, especially in certain Aboriginal communities where the authorized custodian of a story or a song is duty-bound to perform it in a certain way, on a certain occasion, in a certain place, and wearing certain regalia—*shuká*, for the Tlingit—with certain people present…all prescribed by tradition; otherwise, it will be just words, and worthless. And while non-Aboriginal writers and
artists may have more licence for their individual talents, they are always negotiating between the literary traditions they inherit and the place they inhabit.

There is another way of understanding this. In medieval times, when you learned a language it was said you had the *habit* of it, from the Latin *habitus*, which in turn was a translation of the Greek word *hexis*, referring to the essence of something. We get into the habit of being in a place, of understanding its essence, in much the same way we do a language; we learn the “habits” of them. If we learn this early, if the language is our mother tongue and the place is where we are born or grew up, we forget the learning and assume it all comes naturally. But it doesn’t. A child *learns* a language—learns that C-A-T is both a cat and nothing but an arbitrary set of sounds and letters; and beyond the specific arbitrarinesses of one language or another, a child also learns about the contradictions of literature from some culturally-based equivalent of nursery rhymes and bedtime stories—about their being both true and not true all at the same time, and how “once upon a time” means “right now.” Believing these songs and stories—which means simultaneously believing and not believing them—becomes a habit, and sooner or later we forget that we once learned how to do so.

With place, too, there is a learning, though it is often so intimately connected with language that we are unaware of it. But when we come to it later, just as when we come to learn a language later in life, we become conscious of the need to change our intellectual and emotional “habits,” our ways of thinking and feeling and behaving in the new place. David Wagoner, a poet from Washington, tells of coming over the Cascades and down into the coastal rainforest for the first time in the fall of 1954. “It was a big event for me,” he writes. “It was a real crossing of a threshold, a real change of consciousness. Nothing was ever the same again.” Crossing a threshold, and a real change of consciousness. It sounds very much like a religious conversion. Going the other way, Bruce Hutchison described a visit he made to the Cariboo in 1956, and how “the reek of the sea and the Pacific jungle changes, as soon as you cross the Coast range, to the stinging medicinal whiff of bull pine, juniper, sage-brush and clay…A dank, lethargic coastal man like me,” he continued, “fills his lungs with dry upland air, regains his youth and seems to need no sleep at night.” Most of us could add a dozen more geographies, with different flora and fauna and distinct climates and communities. Do these differences determine habits that are different in kind, or merely in degree? Do they require or inspire different languages, and different literatures?

Around the time that Darwin’s theory of evolution was taking hold, environmental determinists proposed that geography shapes thought and feeling as much as language does, an idea which survives in stereotypes about people who live in one place or another. Islands, especially, have long been the subject of such speculation. A few years ago, the Barbadian writer...
Kamau Brathwaite made himself very popular in postcolonial circles for lamenting that the hurricanes which are part of his Caribbean world do not howl in the rhythms of English verse. Would we say the same about, say, the avalanches that are a sometimes sad part of ours? Or lightning in the Interior after a month of dry weather? Or tidewater at Skookumchuck? Or sunset at Clayoquot? Do we have—do we need—new imaginative forms for these? If the imagination shapes both land and its literatures, how much do places—or race or gender, for that matter—shape our imaginations? In one form or another this may be the oldest question in the world.

“In Wildness is the preservation of the World” wrote Henry David Thoreau. I prefer a comment by Scott Russell Sanders, from a small volume published in Alaska a few years ago in defence of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Gwich’in territory; and I prefer it both because it is in chorus with much Aboriginal knowledge about the environment and because even more than Thoreau’s famous statement it acknowledges the relationship between the work of the world and the call of the wild. “Wilderness,” writes Sanders, “represents in space what the Sabbath represents in time—a limit to our dominion, a refuge from the quest for power and wealth, an acknowledgment that the earth does not belong to us.” This is the opposite of Robert Frost’s regrettable line that “The land was ours before we were the land’s”; though in fairness Frost catches himself a few lines later when he says “we found our salvation in surrender,” admitting that the contradictions of language and literature are closely connected to those that inform our attitudes to land. Some of these contradictions result in conflict—over “ownership,” at times, but more generally over use and occupancy, which translates these days into what Wendell Berry, that curmudgeonly defender of environmental values, calls “the cherished contempt [of conservationists] for ranchers, farmers, loggers and other land users”…the mirror image of the contempt of early settlers for what they perceived as the “idle” use of land by hunter-gatherer societies.

Taking a different line, Richard Nelson—who wrote one of the finest anthropological studies of the past half-century about his time with the Koyukon people in Alaska, *Make Prayers to the Raven*—suggests in *The Island Within* that “the forest is not a cathedral, it is sacredness itself.” This may get us closer to understanding the conflict that Berry speaks of, for what is often at issue is our antipathy to—and our corresponding failure to acknowledge—not just a particular social or economic activity but sacredness itself. We respect sacred spaces and places, identified as such; but often we have trouble with the idea that the spiritual can be invested in material occupations like hunting and fishing and farming and logging, pursued in what my old friend, the Anishinabek leader Rodney Bobiwash, used to call a good way (and we retain a sense of the spiritual in our use of the word “pollution,” with its ancient religious associations). There must
be, there always has been, a place for both the secular and the sacred in both work and the wild; and in a region like the West Coast, they are inseparable.

This is especially true where “the sea is all around us”—to recall the title of Rachel Carson’s landmark book of 1951. For there is no wilderness like the sea, no work like that which takes place in its domain, and no borderline like that between sea and land, the shoreline. It is always there, a permanent part of this world; and it is never the same from one tide to another. Of all thresholds, to use Wagoner’s word, none fascinates us like the shore, a place of both peril and possibility, of beauty and fear. In literary studies, we routinely acknowledge the special character of shore-lyrics—Walt Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” for example, or Wallace Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West” and Don McKay’s “Finger Pointing at the Moon.” Gary Holthaus writes in his book *Wide Skies: Finding a Home in the West* that the most important thing to recognize about the natural world is its indifference. The sea may be a place of life and death but it is—to quote Holthaus—“no more bent on harm than it is on help. It has no intent of any kind towards us; it is simply present.”

Some of these shore-lyrics, like “Finger Pointing at the Moon,” are elegies, reminding us that death itself is the most indifferent of all our wildernesses. It is said that grave markings were the first written poems; and elegies are certainly among our most compelling literary forms. The first poems I remember from this part of the world were elegies, more or less. One, which my father recited to me from the time I was a child in his boisterous, booming voice, was on the lighter side—Robert Service’s “Cremation of Sam McGee.” Later, I became acquainted with more conventional literary elegies, though for a long time I had a literary education that managed to avoid not only West Coast but Canadian literature entirely—a remarkable achievement. Earle Birney’s elegiac “David,” which I read at university twenty years after it was published, was the first “serious” poem (we were schooled in those categories then) which spoke to me of a place I knew well, the rugged and razor-sharp mountains of the East Kootenays. Like all good writers, Birney wrote of them in a way that made me think I knew exactly where he was, even though he wasn’t exactly anywhere.

And there was another elegy I remember. It appeared in 1957 in a newspaper in Vanderhoof, near Prince George, and I read it the following year when it was reprinted in the *British Columbia Centennial Anthology*, a remarkably interesting and eclectic collection of stories and songs and photographs:

Passed away, On Wednesday, October 8, 1957, at 10:27 a.m., the ageless and mighty Nechako river.

The passing, which brings great sorrow to residents of the Nechako Valley, was slow and agonizing to the tens of thousand of
minnows, trout and the few salmon trapped in pools along the gravel banks as the water slowly receded…

The passing, due to the intervention of man, has destroyed forever a thing of beauty and of divine creation. Gone also, unless man again intervenes, is a haven to thousands of geese, ducks and swans at the Nechako Bird Sanctuary. Add to this loss the treasured beauty of the broad expanse of water which has served as a jewel-like setting for the village of Vanderhoof, and a landing place for seaplanes.

Exit the Nechako and the traditional lands of the Haisla and Carrier peoples. Enter Kitimat and Alcan, and—to be fair—prosperity for many people.

“Believe me, that person alone is interesting who still loves something,” wrote the nineteenth-century cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt, in a passage quoted, once again, by John Haines. When we try to talk about love, just as when we try to talk about the sacred or the wild, we often end up sounding like J. Alfred Prufrock as he tries to sing his love song. After every attempt to say what he means, he has to admit “that is not it at all. That is not what I meant at all.” At the end, he retreats with us into a moment of pure wonder—on the shore, of course—until, in an archetypal contradiction, “human voices wake us and we drown.” This is what also happened to William Wordsworth, the country boy from Cumbria with his strange habits and strange northern tongue, when he met the old leech-gatherer on the moor. He ran out of words—not good for a poet, especially one named Wordsworth. Twice he asks the old man—whom he describes as “like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf of rock or sand reposeth”—“how is it that you live, and what is it you do”; and twice he is answered in “choice word and measured phrase, above the reach / Of ordinary men; a stately speech; / Such as grave livers do in Scotland use, / Religious men, who give to God and Man their dues.” Still, the poet cannot understand what the old man is all about, or on about. But he recognizes in his encounter something else, a covenant in wonder with the world, a covenant both in and beyond language, impossible to articulate and impossible to forget. “Awesome,” we might say.

I often think that the literatures of the West Coast are bracketed by these two poems, Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and Wordsworth’s “Leech Gatherer” (also called “Resolution and Independence”), the one expressing the inexpressibility (in language, at least) of love, and the other the dignity of the labour we routinely discount and discredit. Indeed, Wordsworth’s poem illustrates better than a shelf of social studies the attitude of generations of strangers to hunter-gatherer peoples around the world, including those on our West Coast.
And there’s something else, also represented by Wordsworth. More than any other writer of his time, he wrote about local figures, including beggars and gypsies and idiots and outcasts, and about local flowers. Indeed, Wordsworth’s poems about daisies and daffodils, which were the roadside equivalent of dandelions in his day, appeared at the beginning of a volume with some of his greatest sonnets on justice and liberty in the language. What are those daisy and daffodil poems about? asked the critics. Daffodils and daisies, replied the poet. Covenants in wonder. Robert Schumann was once asked to explain a particularly difficult piece of music he had written. He played it again.

In an interview quoted by Tom Wayman in his essay “The Skin of the Earth,” the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, one of the icons of the literatures of the West Coast, is asked a series of questions in what Tom acidly describes as “the best professorial style”—not my style, of course; but you get the point. Here is a bit of the interview.

*Some symbols keep recurring in your poetry, for instance the sea, fish, birds…*

I don’t believe in symbols. Those are material things. The sea, fish, and birds have material existence for me. I depend on them just as I depend upon daylight…Some themes persist in my poetry, are constantly reappearing, but they are material entities.

*Like flames, wine, or fire.*

We live with flames, wine, and fire also. Fire is part of our life in this world.

*Doves, guitar—what do they mean?*

A dove means a dove and a guitar is a musical instrument called a guitar.

It’s not that simple, we know, especially when we are dealing with a writer as spiritual as Neruda. But we cheer him on, and call for more. And no-one who has read Patrick Lane’s magnificent memoir, *There Is a Season*, would doubt that your life sometimes depends upon getting the words right, on the scrupulous naming of things without evasion or equivocation—the birds and insects and flowers and the incorrigible English ivy of his garden, as well as the vodka and the violence and the fatal memories of his family. His book was published in the United States under the title *What the Stones Remember*; and to paraphrase Lorna Crozier, presiding spirit of that book and so much else, *we* need to remember not simply the plants and animals that call this place home and the places and people whose lives have intersected with ours, but that they all go on without us. Just like the old leech-gatherer did. Their indifference, to use Gary Holthaus’s word, is part of their gift to us. The other part is the demand for detail. Accuracy is everything; it’s just a different kind of accuracy in the ceremonies of the secular and the sacred, where it is daisies and daffodils or justice and liberty or truth and beauty and goodness. What the poet Thom Gunn once called “the dull thunder of approximate words” breaks the covenant.

In a series of radio broadcasts for the CBC *Ideas* program that had just been started in the mid-1960s by Phyllis Webb and William Young, Earle Birney turned to Confucius for a list of the reasons for reading and listening to stories and songs. A couple of them are nicely contradictory: they bring us nearer to community, preserving traditional values; and they foster uprising against oppression, teaching us to stand apart. Then, some other practicalities. Stories and songs “help us to remember the names of birds, animals, plants, trees; and they make us aware of things, and sharpen our vision”—in Birney’s words, they help us “spot that bird, as well as name it.”

Here is more of what Confucius had to say, this time taken directly from his *Analects*:

> If names be incorrect, speech will not follow its natural sequence. If speech does not follow its natural sequence, nothing can be established. If nothing can be established, no rules of conduct or music will prevail. Where rules of conduct and music do not prevail, law and punishments will not be just. When law and punishment are not just, the people will not know where to place their hands and feet.

What Confucius was calling for was discipline and ceremony in the use of language. For all its unfamiliar connections and antique decorum, his injunction informs a great deal that we still do. We teach correct names in particle physics, plant biology, human physiology, property law, pharmacy, prosody, praise, and prayer; and we try to show how everything follows from that. This is what the protocols of any culture are all about, and it is why we emphasize the need for correctness—in the languages of the arts and sciences, as well as in the litanies of religious faiths and regulatory regimes. Sherman Alexie has a poem titled “Spokane, 1976” which speaks of this need in another context:

> Once, my father saw an old Indian man weeping on the corner and drove around the block twelve times before he remembered the old man’s name and shouted it out the window so the old man would also remember.

Mnemosyne, the muse of Memory in the Greek pantheon, has always been the patron saint of poetry. Alexie reminds us that she is also the patron of the poor.
Singers and storytellers are not easily confined to categories, even those of language and culture; and they love connections. Nora Marks Dauenhauer, the custodian of some of the most important oral traditions of her people, writes that when she read the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* and the Icelandic *Njal's Saga* “they seem so Tlingit in their concern with funerals and family trees.” Later, she says, “I read Homer, Ferlinghetti, e.e. cummings, Basho, John Haines, Gary Snyder, Dennis Tedlock and Han Shan. They became some of my teachers.”

The legendary Han Shan is celebrated by Snyder in his series of Cold Mountain poems, included in his 1992 collection of new and selected poems, *No Nature*. “These poems belong to the west coast tongue,” said Snyder in the Preface to that volume. Snyder has been challenged for appropriating the imaginative traditions of others, especially Aboriginal peoples; but keeping within the limits that others have set is less important than keeping faith with the faithkeepers. And oral traditions, when performed to a wide audience, almost always welcome company. Robert Bringhurst has argued convincingly that some individual Aboriginal talents working within their linguistic and cultural traditions belong in the history of the world’s great literature; and while he would be the first to say that it doesn’t require one of us to make the case, nonetheless it is important to make the connections, for it enhances the stature of world literatures as well as of Aboriginal literatures. And the connections are those of place—the islands and coasts and mountains and rivers and valleys and plains of the world—as well as of people. Derek Walcott has often said that a fisherman on his island of St. Lucia watching the sun go down or the sea come up in the Caribbean is one with the fisherman two-thousand years earlier in the Mediterranean, when Homer was reciting his epics…and if we don’t believe that, then we might as well stop reading and listening to literature. And that goes for the people in all the world’s stories and songs. My wife Lorna Goodison—a West Indian West Coast poet in a line of descent that goes back to one of the founders of this province, Governor James Douglas, who was born in Demarara, Guyana—tells of reading a very personal poem about her Jamaican mother to an audience in London, England, and afterwards a young boy came up to her and said it sounded like it was about his mother, who lived in Italy.

Philip Levine, who lived for much of life in Fresno, California, once described a reading he gave on North Beach in San Francisco with Snyder. “I liked his presence, I liked it better than my own” he said of Snyder, “and so did the audience. In order to defend myself, I said the house was stacked in his favor, but I knew he gave them more…that his poems were more eloquent and looser at the same time…He was writing for and about the people who were listening.” We know what he meant, and it has to do with language more than with literary craft. But all singers and storytellers perform for “the people who are listening,” whoever and (thanks to the wonders of printing and now recording) wherever and whenever they are. To tell them not to do so would be
like telling Ezra Pound not to begin his *Cantos* with the line “And then went down to the ships” because others have said that. Sometimes, of course, those stories and songs—both within and beyond the Aboriginal communities—are limited by ceremonial protocols. But mostly the limitations are far fewer than we might think.

When I came to university, my reading was in the wider world of literature; and not much even of that, I regret to say, despite the best efforts of some very good schoolteachers. I came first to Victoria College, as the University of Victoria was called then, but in 1961 I transferred to the University of British Columbia. Lining up for English courses, I found myself staring at a scary-looking fellow with a black eyepatch sitting behind the registration desk. His name—Robert Creeley—meant nothing to me at the time, though he was well known in literary circles as an American poet of stern principles and a lovely sense of humour. I asked him what courses I should take. “Doesn’t matter a damn,” he said. “It won’t make any difference.”

He was half right, which would have pleased him. I chose a class that fitted my schedule—I was in another program at the time—with books that didn’t interest me very much, taught by a young fellow from London and the Channel Islands by way of Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues and Virginia Woolf’s literary lighthouse on the Isle of Skye. His name was John Hulcoop, and he probably taught others here this evening; he certainly taught Chris Douglas. John had inherited a keen ear for language—some of it picked up on his parents’ Channel island of Jersey and on Guernsey, where his wife’s family was from, and where Norse and French and English had been combined into a dialect that was close cousin to Chinook, and still has currency in the island parliament and courts. So he was right at home on the West Coast, where every island is—in the words of the folksinger Valdy—“a difference of opinion surrounded by water”; he quickly caught the spirit of its stories and the music of its songs; and he understood what Earle Birney once referred to as the universal “breath-catching something in the language that finally convinces us we are in the presence of a poem, that we have reached [Edgar Allan] Poe’s ‘wild, weird clime that lieth, sublime, / out of SPACE-out of TIME’, the perilous Keatsian seas [‘in faery lands forlorn’], or merely the ‘Ya-honk’ of Whitman’s wild gander in the cool night, or Williams’ red wheelbarrow in the rain...It works, for us,” Birney concluded. It worked for John Hulcoop. And thanks to him, it worked for me.

“Language listens to the world, I listen with it. What I hear when I listen is a question, which is listening itself,” writes Bringhurst in his meditation on meaning and the motive for metaphor, *The Tree of Meaning*. Few writers are better at listening than Bringhurst; but few are also as dedicated to the written text, and the textures of print. The two are not nearly as separate as we sometimes
think. Tracking is a form of reading, mostly between the lines; and we all know the natural world must be read as well as listened to. But the listening required is not straightforward, and the West Coast is one place where we can learn the right habits. Listen for stories, as well as to them, Julie Cruikshank advises us in her book *Do Glaciers Listen?* Listen to the craft as well, Ann Fineup-Riordan says in the remarkable exhibition catalogue of material culture *Yuungnaqpiallerput: The Way We Genuinely Live*, showing how “everything that is made—all the implements and adornments of life—causes us to remember.” Listen after seeing, the Oregon ecologist Kathleen Moore insists; and Laurie Ricou shows us how in *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory*, a book no-one interested in the literatures—and the languages—of the West Coast should be without. And finally, just listen, says Wendy Wickwire in her fine renderings of the stories of Okanagan elder Harry Robinson.

The University of Victoria is blessed with some excellent scholars in the business of reading and listening, whom I salute this evening. And here respect is due as well to the publishers who have brought much—or I should say many—of the literatures of the West Coast to us, smaller publishers such as Talonbooks and Ronsdale Press and Sono Nis—whose name catches the contradictions I have been talking about, for it means (in two languages) “we are and we are not”; and larger houses such as the University of British Columbia Press, the University of Washington Press, and Douglas and McIntyre. In that regard, I should like to pay special tribute to Scott McIntyre. Some years ago, during the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, I had the privilege of leading a group of elders and scholars in designing an Aboriginal History project that was to include a dozen or so different volumes, each shaped by the linguistic, cultural, and spiritual traditions of the Aboriginal communities or confederacies, and their complex mix of oral and written forms. It is an indication of the commitment of the Aboriginal peoples of this region that the first volume was to represent the histories of the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en, who had generously agreed to let their ada’a’ox and kungax—the traditional cycles of story and song that are their history—be given wider currency in a written form consistent with the principles of their oral performance; and it is a credit to Scott McIntyre that he was ready to commit Douglas and McIntyre to the publication of all the volumes in the projected series—at least a dozen—and to the establishing of editorial boards with tribal elders and historians for each, with control over every phase of the production. Sadly, the commissioners split on giving the final go-ahead—though they had already spent several hundred thousand dollars on the planning—deciding instead to rewrite history themselves. But the West Coast is fortunate to have publishers of this quality and dedication up and down the coast and throughout the Interior.

Lorna and I have our home in Halfmoon Bay on the Sunshine Coast, and one of our neighbours up the road in Pender Harbour is Howard White. In the opening essay of the
recently published collection *Imagining British Columbia: Land, Memory and Place*, he writes about his time in English classes at UBC when, in Howie’s words

every time Professor Akrigg—the distinguished Renaissance scholar—[would] point out a great line by Shakespeare I heard echoes of my old logger friends back in the bunkhouse of my Dad’s logging camp, and it seemed to me their good lines were good in exactly the same way Milton’s were. In both cases you had a wordslinger whose aim was to score a knockout punch with the audience by choosing just the right word in just the right place, who spent a lot of time perfecting their skill, and who got damn good at it. In fact I was pretty sure that if Frost or Shelley showed up at one of those bullshitting contests, they would have had their hands full keeping up to old Snaky Spence for sheer invention, drama and texture of language.

“Thus,” he continued, “my defensiveness about the people and ways I had grown up with back on the rural B.C. coast took on a literary dimension”…and among other things resulted in Harbour Publishing—another wonderful publishing house. It includes, among its fine authors, not only Patrick Lane and Tom Wayman and many others represented in anthologies of West Coast literatures but also Aboriginal storytellers like the Nuxalk elder Clayton Mack, who dictated the best-selling book *Grizzlies and White Guys*, in which he confides that in his experience the most mysterious creatures on earth are grizzly bears and white men.

We must never count anyone out, as Howard White’s achievement demonstrates. Philip Akrigg and his wife Helen, when they weren’t reciting Shakespeare, compiled a study of *British Columbia Place Names* that is still the standard. Which brings us back to local names, and local people. Where I grew up, there were songs and stories all around, local versions of the corridos of Mexico, flowing with the rivers—that’s what *corridos* means—and like them following the extraordinary events of the everyday in songs like Wilf Carter’s “Mad Trapper of Rat River,” which tells the tale as well as any and was tried out around every campfire in the Interior; the ancient psalms sung in a strange language and even stranger style by Doukhoubor women in Victory Square in Vancouver, when Big Fanny Storgeoff led the Great March down to the coast to protest the imprisonment of their fathers and brothers and husbands in the Sons of Freedom sect; the everyday unordinary tales told me by my cousin Jack Cowdry, a gentle trucker and trainman who by the end of his life had driven every backcountry road in this province, and remembered every mile; and the stand-up riffs of the rodeo cowboys I travelled with from the
East Kootenays down to Libby and Coeur-d’Alene and Spokane, who used their gifts of the
tongue with an inventiveness I would put beside any Renaissance rapper.

But the stories that were the match of any I have ever heard, anywhere—and that
includes a lifetime of listening around the world—were told with practised care and craft by the
late George Laforme from Revelstoke—a prospector and guide and the one to call when a grizzly
or a cougar ambled into town. George could have swapped stories all night with Charles Dickens
or Mark Twain; beaten them at poker or bridge or any other card game they fancied; and after a
night of storytelling and cardplaying and gossip with Frank Grace, who had taken a couple days
off from his job on the railroad, George would make them all the best breakfast they ever tasted
and be ready with another story before they got up from the table. I have spoken elsewhere about
the Khoikhoi storytellers in the Kalahari, who begin all their stories with a word, |garube. It
means “the happening that is not happening.” George Laforme’s stories exemplified that
contradiction. You never knew—and after a moment you never cared—whether what you were
hearing was true or not, because by then you believed it. His words weren’t about an event; they
were the event. His son and my old friend is here this evening; he too has learned the family craft
well, with a whole new set of mischievous turns that would make Raven and Coyote proud.

And there is more in that family, from another of the great heritages of this West Coast.
George’s wife Dianne and her brother Cliff Higano, whom I have also known most of my life,
tell stories—with rare grace and generosity—about their Japanese Canadian family, and their
long lives in Vancouver and Revelstoke. Their stories are filled with the dignity and decency of
people who have lived in the presence of powers, for good and ill, that may be beyond their
control but are not beyond their ability to shape into stories, stories that help them—and help us
all—to live our lives. That was the last of the reasons Confucius gave for stories and songs: they
lift our spirits. And just as we are beginning to find good ways of putting Aboriginal performance
on the page, so we need to find ways of bringing these other stories, told by these other gifted
storytellers, into print. As much as any, they are the ones I have come home to.

The eccentric Amor de Cosmos—christened William Smith, but he preferred “Lover of the
Universe”—was a strong promoter of Confederation and sometime premier of British
Columbia. During a debate in 1870, he said that he “would not object to a little revolution now
and again in British Columbia.” So I’ll end with a story of an uprising. A story from my family.

My father sang songs, and he loved puns and the play of words. But it was my mother
who told most of the stories in our family, which she would do with a kind of conspiratorial
flourish that would catch us up every time. She was born in 1899, had lived in Vancouver from 1911, and knew some Chinook creole. Her best friend was Margaret Williams, who became my godmother. Margaret was Métis, the granddaughter of a Cree woman and a Scotsman, the chief factor of the Hudson’s Bay Company in Fort Qu’Appelle in Saskatchewan during the 1880s when Louis Riel led his people in rebellion—or uprising, as they called it—against the new Dominion of Canada. Margaret’s mother was twelve or thirteen at the time; and after Riel’s defeat and trial for treason (when he said he’d rather be judged bad than mad), she visited him in prison in Regina every other day until his execution. How she did so, and why, is a mystery; but she kept a journal, in which Riel—who imagined himself as the psalmist David, dashing down his enemies with words and music—would write remarks like “evening prayer gives more pleasure in heaven than all the military music played by the North West Mounted Police outside my cell window.”

When I knew my godmother Margaret years later, she still had her mother’s journal, which she would read to me like holy scripture. Margaret had met my mother in Vancouver in the early years of the century, when they were both young girls, about the same age as Margaret’s mother when she visited Louis Riel. My mother’s father—my grandfather—had gone west to Fort Macleod the year before Riel’s uprising; and although he represented much that Riel resented about settlement in the west, he went back to Regina to support Riel at his trial. Why he did so is as much a mystery as those visits by Margaret’s mother, though historians confirm that many westerners felt common cause with Riel in his opposition to Ottawa. Plus ça change. My grandfather’s first wife died in childbirth; so after he married my grandmother, he sent her back to her family in Ingersoll, Ontario, to have the baby they were expecting. But she, too, died in childbirth, the day my mother was born; and my grandfather, probably pole-axed by grief, stayed in Macleod while my mother was raised by her aunt, her mother’s sister—who gave up her own engagement to take my mother into a household of maiden aunts. They lavished all their attention on her, and had a tutor come to teach her about the world as far away as, well, as Woodstock, down the road a full ten miles.

Then, when she was twelve, my grandfather sold his ranch, moved to Vancouver, built a house, and called for his daughter. I can’t even begin to imagine what it must have been like for her aunt, to lose the daughter she had raised since birth; and I can hardly imagine what it must have been like for my mother, traveling three-thousand miles away from the only home she’d ever known, and the only family she’d ever had, to live with a man she barely knew. But she did, and went to school (scary at the best of times) for the first time in her life.

There, she met Margaret. My mother was painfully shy, at least beyond a small circle; and Margaret, like many Métis of her generation, was painfully silent about her heritage, certainly to
anyone outside that same small circle. Maybe it was the spirit of Louis Riel, or my grandfather, or those formidable maiden aunts in Ingersoll, or that little half-breed girl visiting the prison in Regina…but together, they…Well, this is the story my mother told me.

The school they went to was housed in an old building on 41st Avenue in Vancouver, with a large upstairs room—really an attic with sloping ceilings. They would go there for tea, served every afternoon to the girls. And every morning, first thing, the girls and their teachers—about sixty, all told—would traipse up the narrow stairs for assembly and prayers.

One morning, Margaret and my mother were late; and when they got to the door at the top of the stairs it was shut. The morning hymn had begun.

New every morning is the love
Our wakening and uprising prove…

Uprising? The two girls looked at each other. Then, without saying a word, they rose up and bolted the door. They heard another line—“Fit us for perfect rest above”—and they giggled. They giggled through the announcements, and through the roll call, when they were the only ones who didn’t say “here, ma’am”…and they were still giggling when the headmistress led the school to the door at the top of the staircase and tried to open it.

That was always the end of the story. My mother would never tell me what happened next. “Use your imagination,” she’d say with a smile. In my imagination, they are still there, sitting on the staircase at Crofton House School, two giggling girls wondering what they have done, and what to do next. Like Louis Riel’s uprising, theirs probably lasted only a moment; but that moment—and the wonder that filled it—became mine.

And their story, unfinished as it is, became my touchstone for all stories. And for the literatures of the West Coast, which like all literatures are always unfinished, so that we can come up with new stories and songs, and new covenants in wonder with our world.

Mahsie, in Chinook. Thank you.
Sources and Related Reading


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Professor Chamberlin was Senior Research Associate for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, worked on the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry and the Alaska Native Claims Commission, and has been a consultant on indigenous land claims in Canada, the United States, Africa, and Australia. He was Poetry Editor for *Saturday Night*, has been a Guggenheim Fellow, and has delivered the Pratt, Woodcock, and Sedgewick Lectures. He was awarded the degrees of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) from the University of the West Indies in 2002 and Doctor of Canon Law from St. John's College, University of Manitoba, in 2008.

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