

Ethnohistory Field School Report

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Kinship Obligations to the Environment: Interpreting Stó:lō X̱ex̱á:ḻs Stories of the Fraser Canyon

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The Ethnohistory Field School is a collaboration of the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre and the History Departments of the University of Victoria and University of Saskatchewan.



The following project was originally conceived by Grand Chief Clarence “Kat” Pennier and the staff at the Stó:lō Nation Research and Resource Management Centre (RRMC) as part of the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Victoria’s Ethnohistory Fieldschool. Pennier suggested that a student document and interpret Stó:lō legends that discuss how to take care of the environment and teach us to be good people. David Schaepe, co-director and archeologist at the RRMC, further refined the topic by recommending that I focus specifically on the X̱ex̱á:ls¹ stories of the Fraser Canyon in order to continue RRMC’s on-going work on Iyoq̱thet, transformation sites. As I embarked on this research I realized that interpreting X̱ex̱á:ls stories was not a straightforward task. On May 28th, 2013 I had the privilege of interviewing Ná:xáxlẖts’i, Albert “Sonny” McHalsie of Shxw’ow’hamel First Nation, co-director, historian, and cultural advisor at RRMC. Upon my request he told Professor John Lutz and myself the story of X̱ex̱á:ls and the Indian doctor, X̱éyḻelemòs (Lady Franklin Rock).² After reviewing the tape and researching numerous versions of this story,³ I realized how both the content and my

¹ X̱ex̱á:ls are four sibling black bears, three brothers and one sister, who made the world right through transformations. In the distant past, the world was chaotic; people could communicate with animals, and animals could take off their coats to become human. X̱ex̱á:ls punished people by turning them to stone, rewarded people by turning them into local resources, and fixed people, animals, and land features into their permanent forms. X̱ex̱á:ls are sometimes referred to in the singular form X̱á:ls, a variation that suggests Christian influence. Stories about X̱ex̱á:ls are classified as s̱w̱ō̱x̱wiyám in Halkomelem: oral histories that describe the distant past. Keith Thor Carlson ed., *A Stó:lō Coast Salish Historical Atlas* (Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, Seattle: U of Washington P, Chilliwack: Stó:lō Heritage Trust, 2001), 6.

² See Appendix A for full transcript of story.

³ Franz Boas, *Indian Myths & Legends from the North Pacific Coast of North America*, eds. Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy, trans. Dietrich Bertz (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2002), 108. Johnny Bob, interviewed by Marian Smith, Transcription of Field Note Pads: Marian Westley Smith Collection (RAI Library; MS 268:2 No. 20), 8-9. Mrs. Louis George, “Transformer II (Lower Fraser River),” in *Lower Fraser Indian Folktales*, collected by Norman Lerman (typescript, 1950-1951), 145-147. Charles Hill-Tout, *The Salish People: The Local Contribution of Charles Hill-Tout, Vol. II: The Squamish and the Lilloet*, ed. Ralph Maud (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1978), 128. Mrs. August Jim, interviewed by Oliver Wells, in *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbors* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987), 64-65. Robert Joe, interviewed by Wilson Duff, *Stalo Notebooks #3*, Summer 1950, 27-28. Dave Johnny, interviewed by Matilda Gutierrez, *Stó:lō Heritage Project*, Chilliwack, B.C., June 23, 1972, Tape #35. Sweetie Malloway quoted in Crisca Bierwert, *Brushed by Cedar, Living by the River: Coast Salish Figures of Power* (Tucson: U of Arizona P,

interpretation of the story were affected by the setting and context within which it was told. Our interview took place in Dragon Dynasty, McHalsie's favourite Chinese restaurant in Chilliwack, BC and was a follow-up to a boat tour of transformer sites along the Fraser River that McHalsie had led a few days earlier. When in the restaurant McHalsie had to describe physical places instead of simply pointing to them. He spent significant time explaining in detail the Stó:lō custom of not taking money for spiritual work or not hiring a spiritual worker, something a cultural insider would not need explained. He also knew that I had been asked to research lessons from the Fraser Canyon X̱exá:ls stories. I had a specific purpose to my interview and asked questions pertaining to the context in which the story was typically told and the lessons the story taught. McHalsie mentioned that Matilda "Tilly" Gutierrez was told this story during her puberty rites and sat on the rock where X̱exá:ls sat, but did not know of a general occasion where the story was regularly told. The lessons he mentioned are as follows:

Well, one for sure about the Indian Doctors, not taking money and not charging, not getting rich. [...] And then it seems like the whole teaching about xo:lí:s [...] that's an example of what could happen if you don't listen or don't do what you're supposed to do [...]. I don't know, just seems like there's probably some kind of showing connection to people upriver too, because it talks about X̱éylx̱elemòs coming from Spuzzum [...]. People from X̱elhálh are intermarried with people up there, so it seems like that's a lesson as well, because the Halkomelem word for Thompson people is S'em'oméla and S'em'oméla means like our grandchildren [...]. And then the importance of tunnels is probably in there as well [...]. What else is it? Not sure why he would have transformed his cane, I don't know what sort of teaching would be from that.⁴

The potential lessons of the X̱éylx̱elemòs story are numerous, but not concrete. McHalsie has dedicated his life to listening, learning, researching, documenting, and telling Stó:lō transformer stories and yet he does not prescribe what exact lesson the X̱éylx̱elemòs story teaches. He provided extremely educated guesses; it "seems like" particular messages are implied, lessons

1999), 54. Susan Peters, interviewed by Roy Point, *Stó:lō Heritage Project*, Chilliwack, B.C., February 29, 1972, Tape #10.

⁴ Albert McHalsie, interview by author, Chilliwack, BC, May 28, 2013.

are “probably in there,” but there is room left for multiplicity and interpretation. How was I going to reduce this rich multiplicity into one environmental lesson? How would that change the story and future tellings of the story? How would that lesson be used and to what effect?

Each of these questions pertains to what Julie Cruikshank has defined as the social life of stories: the context and intent behind a story’s use that ultimately produces its social significance and meaning.⁵ What social life was I attempting to create for these stories and what ultimate meaning was I making (up)? Finding didactic lessons within the transformer stories of the Fraser Canyon is problematic when stories are taken out of their originally intended contexts. Stories are mobilized by tellers for specific purposes, teachings, and causes and tailored to suit, which makes gleaning didactic lessons from records of older tellings a difficult and potentially damaging task. Anthropological records provide only point form notes on the major plot points of stories, leaving a sketch of what once was and more recent interview transcripts, like mine, are usually recorded with the intention of preservation or providing only a reference point for future tellings. Important as it is to preserve stories, codifying their lessons and interpretations requires a specific context and intent. However, I argue that applying a literary framework to the interpretation of transformer stories of the Fraser Canyon, allows for multiplicity and complexity, and in turn the future mobilization of these stories in a variety of contexts. A literary framework also illuminates an ecology of kinship ties between stories, their tellers, and the transformation sites. *Xexá:ls* stories of the Canyon act as a continual reminder of the kinship obligations *Stó:lō* people have to the land and their ancestral connection to transformer sites.

I first became aware of some of the difficulties of finding didactic lessons in the stories of the Canyon through an interview I conducted with Chief Clem Seymour of Seabird Island.

⁵ Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Texts: Editing on the Page and in Performance*, in *Talking on the Page: Editing Aboriginal Oral Texts*, eds. Laura J. Murray and Keren Rice (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999), 98.

Seymour was cautious about telling me particulars about the stories themselves, but instead focused on the role of the stories in teaching how to look after and respect the balance of the Canyon.⁶ He stressed the importance of learning the stories on the land and not being told what they mean, but finding out what they mean for yourself. People have their own interpretations of what happened and those interpretations translate into responsibility to the land. Seymour's understanding of the stories comes from growing up with them and understanding the history. He understands that the stories teach, "what you look after in life, looks after you" and "this is your land, you look after it, because the creator's not going to make anymore."⁷ He warned me in particular that an understanding of these stories does not come from paper and to keep in mind that informants usually told anthropologists "what they wanted to hear."⁸

Seymour's warning takes into account the intent behind telling stories, alluding to one of the difficulties in reviewing anthropological records for didactic lessons. Most recorded stories are removed from their original contexts and the typical social settings in which they are told. For example, James A. Teit recorded the following transformer tale at Hope from "an old man who could speak some Thompson":

A Transformer came down the Fraser River from Utã'mqt country. When he arrived at a creek a little west of Spuzzum, he saw a girl washing herself in the water. He asked her what she was doing, and she answered that she was washing herself. He said, "You must die," and transformed her into a rock, which may still be seen in the creek.

A Transformer came to Yale, and there he saw a man smoking. He asked him what he was doing, and he answered that he was smoking. The Transformer said to him, "You must die;" and the man answered, "Very well, but do not put me into the water. I want to remain here, so that the people may see me and talk to me, and that I may see

⁶ Many Stó:lō people feel that it is taboo to talk about Xexá:ls stories. Seymour stated that these stories have been put away until people are ready to hear them and truly understand their meaning. I have tried my best here to stress the importance of learning these stories from Elders and on the land in order to understand them in the fullest sense. Clem Seymour, interview by author, Seabird Island, B.C., May 28, 2013.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

them.” When he finished speaking, he was transformed into a stone, which may be seen there. It is shaped like a man.⁹

From Teit’s account it is easy to conclude that the transformer is condemning washing and smoking; however, the lack of causal links in the passage or any context for its telling leaves large gaps in the narrative that problematize any clear message or lesson. Is the didactic lesson to not wash or smoke? In the first transformation, perhaps the transformer is more concerned with the girl’s modesty: not necessarily a traditional concern for Stó:lō people, but one that came with Western influence. Wilson Duff recorded a similar story from Patrick Charlie of Yale in the summer of 1950 that specifically refers to the girl’s pubic region, which potentially corroborates such a lesson of modesty.¹⁰ Maybe the girl was not supposed to bathe in that particular creek or in that particular spot. However, in both versions without context for why or to whom the story was told, determining a singular lesson is impossible. In the second transformation, Teit does not elaborate on what type of smoking or the man’s purpose for smoking. I assume that at the turn of the 20th century the story was not promoting healthy lifestyles and the dangers of recreational smoking; however, it could be used for that purpose today. This story may refer to Xéylxelemòs, because of the location and stone “shaped like a man.” The man’s request “that I may see them” could be in reference to Xéylxelemòs’ third eye. But Teit’s account does not provide enough detail to even begin interpreting the same kinds of teachings that McHalsie has been able to after years of studying the Xéylxelemòs story. In both transformations, the informant may have been referring to spiritual practices of cleansing. Above all, the story could

⁹ James A. Teit, *Tales from the Lower Fraser River*, in *Memoirs of the American Folk-Lore Society*, Vol. XI (1917), 129.

¹⁰ “Up about 3 miles [from Yale], on this side, he came upon a young woman, about 12 or 13, swimming. She saw him, ran, and lay down on a rock, and he turned her to stone. She can still be seen at low water. ‘Can see everything.’ She is about 9’ tall, has colored fine grass, which never dies, growing on her pubic region.” Patrick Charlie interviewed by Wilson Duff, *Stalo Notebooks #2* (Summer 1950), 3.

be mistranslated as the man most likely was only communicating with Teit in Thompson¹¹ of which he could only speak “some.”

As a countermeasure to misinterpretation, Robert Bringhurst in his study of Haida mythtellers advocates for precise word-for-word transcriptions and translations of myths as more accurate representations of stories. He claims that “all the rest is paraphrase: a fraudulent form of silence.”¹² Even though he holds a fairly extreme position, Bringhurst is rightfully wary of anthropologist paraphrase, because it detaches stories from their context, detail, literary and artistic qualities, oral performances, and individual tellers. Teit’s account may be mistranslated, misinformed, or merely a scant outline of the original story, generating at best slippery interpretations. Anthropological records contain complexity, missing links, and gaps that inhibit singular interpretation.

Another concern in extracting didactic lessons from Xexá:ls stories is how the lessons will be used. The social significance assigned to the stories within the time and context in which they are used will directly affect what lessons emerge. Cruikshank observes that she has “seen written versions of narratives used as a reference point for reanimating social meanings that might otherwise be erased.”¹³ However, those social meanings are not universal and the same story and textual reference point can be used for a number of purposes. Cruikshank labels this process “editing in performance,” where a teller will tailor performances to suit different audiences. She remarks, “a single story can ‘do’ several different things.”¹⁴ Depending on what a story is “doing,” the intended lesson will change.

¹¹ Teit spoke fluent Thompson having married a Nlaka’pamux woman and lived in Spences Bridge. Wendy Wickwire, “Teit, James Alexander,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, accessed October 9, 2013, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/teit_james_alexander_1884_15E.html.

¹² Robert Bringhurst, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2011), 338.

¹³ Cruikshank, 99.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 107.

Recently stories have been used to compile traditional knowledge in order to create culturally appropriate heritage management and environmental policy. One of the ways the Stó:lō Nation RRMC has created such policy is to gather statements from community Elders along with other anecdotal accounts as a basis for overarching principles of heritage management. Schaepe and McHalsie have “codif[ied] Stó:lō cultural teachings, practices, and perspectives in order to provide principles that would function as a foundation for Stó:lō policy and law.”¹⁵ They both have conducted integral work for Stó:lō Nation proposing and implementing culturally appropriate heritage management plans that uphold Stó:lō values and benefit Stó:lō communities. Such policy development provides a fruitful and beneficial context for interpreting X̱ex̱á:ls stories and other traditional Stó:lō stories; however, the context of contemporary policy reveals only one social meaning of a story that is mobilized at a specific time and for a specific purpose. For instance, the transformer story of Xepa:y told to McHalsie by the late Bertha Peters from Seabird tells of a very generous man who is transformed into a cedar tree. For the purposes of policy, this story could be proof that clear-cutting cedar trees conflicts with Stó:lō beliefs, because cedar is sacred. However, in his article “We Have to Take Care of Everything That Belongs to Us,” McHalsie associates numerous teachings with this story, such as how to use the different parts of the cedar tree, how to harvest the bark and roots, and to say a prayer to Xepa:y, because he is an ancestor.¹⁶ Using stories for policy only deploys one of the multiple teachings and understandings of a story. The teachings taken from a X̱ex̱á:ls story for the purposes of policy do not constitute the universal, singular lesson of that story, but only its contemporary social significance.

¹⁵ David M. Schaepe. *Stó:lō Identity and the Cultural Landscape of S’ólh Téméxw*, in *Be of Good Mind: Essays on the Coast Salish*. Ed. Bruce Granville Miller. (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2007), 250.

¹⁶ Albert McHalsie, *We Have to Take Care of Everything that Belongs to Us*, in *Be of Good Mind: Essays on the Coast Salish*. Ed. Bruce Granville Miller. (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2007), 104-105.

One of the dangers of attempting to find singular lessons for the creation of policy is the potential erasure of other meanings, interpretations, and social uses of stories. In some cases this may lead to the erasure of some stories all together, because they do not fit the current context or usage. Cruikshank observes that once original tellers are gone written records tend to be viewed as data and codified into databases. Unfortunately, the stories that do not fit the categories of this data are most likely not included in a database, because they “confuse[] rather than confirm[] familiar categories.”¹⁷ Cruikshank further points out that stories “are not even really about facts or events; they are about coming to grips with the personal meanings of broadly shared knowledge and converting those meanings to social ends,” rendering categorization an inadequate task.¹⁸ Without mobilizing the Xexá:ls stories of the Canyon for an explicit purpose and particularly as a cultural outside uninitiated in Stó:lō storytelling practices, I find it more productive to analyze and interpret the stories’ “broadly shared knowledge,” while still permitting space for personal meaning and multiple social significances.

In order to conduct an analysis of the shared knowledge of Xexá:ls stories of the canyon, I apply a literary framework as opposed to an anthropological or historical one. An anthropological framework would analyze these stories as cultural production and an historical framework would view them as a product of a moment in time, whereas a literary framework accounts for individual expression and social significance.¹⁹ Clifford Geertz in his article “Deep Play: notes on the Balinese Cockfight” supports a movement away from anthropological analysis towards literary analysis of expressive forms of culture: such a change “shifts the analysis of cultural forms from an endeavor in general parallel to dissecting an organism, diagnosing a

¹⁷ Cruikshank, 117.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁹ Keith Carlson, John Lutz, and David Schaepe, “Turning the Page: Ethnohistory from a New Generation,” *The University of the Fraser Valley Research Review* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 1.

symptom, deciphering a code, or ordering a system – the dominate analogies in contemporary anthropology – to one in general parallel with penetrating a literary text.”²⁰ Geertz recognizes the integral role of interpretation in any kind of anthropological study and argues that analysis should sort out “structures of signification,” the usual job of a literary critic.²¹ Any expressive form, whether it is a cockfight or a transformer story, is a reflection *on* culture rather than a reflection *of* culture. Viewing the X̱ex̱á:ls stories of the Canyon as literary production allows for subjectivity and individual sensibilities, while still maintaining shared cultural knowledge and general teachings as opposed to didactic lessons.

Literary interpretation of the X̱ex̱á:ls stories also aligns with certain Stó:lō philosophies of teaching. Crisca Bierwert in her work *Brushed by Cedar, Living by the River: Coast Salish Figures of Power* explains that a Stó:lō “teaching delivers [...] a path for an intuitive leap in its direction and a template for thinking in its own way.”²² Stories function in a similar way; they provide a direction of understanding, but ultimately are not prescriptive or didactic. Each story provides only a framework for teaching; it is up to the individual as Seymour expressed, to find out personal meaning and true understanding. Lee Maracle has expressed a similar point of view in her essay “Toward a National Literature: ‘A Body of Writing’”: “Sto:lo story, poetry, and song express people’s spiritual connections to the earth; they embrace the human journey from the past to the present and strive to prepare us for the future in a way that keeps the nation

²⁰ Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: notes on the Balinese cockfight,” *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 83, accessed October 9, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20028014>.

²¹ Clifford Geertz, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures, Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 9.

²² Bierwert, 67.

connected to the earth and all living beings without dictating direction or personal conduct.”²³ If Xexá:ls stories of the Canyon do not dictate personal conduct, what do they tell us?

While I find it problematic to extract didactic lessons as to exactly “how” to take care of the environment for the reasons listed above, I do examine the larger structures of significance in Xexá:ls stories of the Canyon that deliver teachings about the environment and Stó:lō people’s relationship to the land. One of the many teachings of these transformer stories is direct ancestral connection to the land. In many cases Stó:lō families carry the ancestral names of transformer sites. McHalsie mentioned that some ancestral names have been forgotten or lost, but a genealogical study would most likely uncover names similar to those of transformer sites.²⁴ Charles Hill-Tout recorded a version of the Xéylxelemòs story by Captain Paul, his chief informant among the Lillooet tribe. Interestingly enough, the story outlines ancestral connections that the Lillooet have to Xéylxelemòs, but has quite a different ending than the Stó:lō versions:

The family hereditary names of the group, whom tradition derives from the *ertwa* men, all relate to the mystery powers of the “first man” or to the magic contest he had with the demi-god Qals. It is recorded that when Qals was travelling down the Fraser he stopped at Yale to try his mystery power upon Paul’s paternal ancestor whose name was Qailqilmos, which means “great in mystery power,” having much the same signification as Qals itself. The contest between the two was very severe, and Qailqilmos was the victor. The trial between them seems to have consisted in taking away each other’s strength and vigour. When Qals perceived that he was beaten, he told his adversary to take a measuring stick (*sqelemten*) and measure all the different parts of his body. Qailqilmos did this. Qals then said, “O my grandfather, you are very strong; now make me strong again.” Qailqilmos restores him to strength and vigour again, and as they parted Qals bade him thereafter call his children by the names of the different measurements he had taken of his body. One of Paul’s names, *sqelemken* “head measure,” is a specimen of these names. Other names of this family are *slatctel*, *slatcetluk*, *slatcelat*. These are also called *tel Qals* “Qals names.” They signify “power to transform.”²⁵

²³ Lee Maracle, *Toward a National Literature: ‘A Body of Writing,’* in *Across Cultures/Across Borders: Canadian Aboriginal and Native American Literatures*. Eds. Paul DePasquale, Renate Eigenbrod, and Emma LaRocque (Peterborough: Broadview, 2010), 90.

²⁴ McHalsie interview.

²⁵ Hill-Tout, 128.

Captain Paul's story outlines his ancestral connection to Qailqilmos, but does not make mention of Lady Franklin Rock or any transformation into stone. Hill-Tout also notes that Captain Paul has kindred in Sts'ailes, implying some familial Stó:lō connection. While this version does not specifically refer to the rock transformation, it does illuminate Lillooet ancestral connections to Xéylxelemòs and the Stó:lō that is similar to McHalsie's interpretation that emphasizes a cross-tribal relationship between the Stó:lō and the Thompson. Franz Boas collected a similar version of the Xéylxelemòs story in the late 1800's most likely from Chief George of Sts'ailes that also omits the transformation and makes mention of Xéylxelemòs as the first man of Xelháhl.²⁶

The QEtłā'tl. Qe'lqEIEmas, the first of the QEtłā'tl was very powerful. His people were all river monsters. Once Qäls came to him. The three brothers crossed the river to visit him while their sister stayed on the opposite shore. They managed to cross the river, which is very dangerous at this spot, without mishap. But when they came to Qe'lqEIEmas, he called his people and when Qäls saw the dreadful shapes, he fainted. Qe'lqEIEmas took a magic substance out of his basket, sprinkled it over Qäls, and revived him.²⁷

As the first man of Xelháhl, Xéylxelemòs is historically significant to that place and to the people who trace their lineage back to that village. In addition, Brent Galloway claims that xe'yxelema:s is a well-known ancestral name, which illustrates Xéylxelemòs' ancestral connections to the Stó:lō as well as the Lillooet.²⁸ Both versions also have Stó:lō influence as Captain Paul had kin in Sts'ailes, where Chief George was from.²⁹ Based on these versions of the Xéylxelemòs story the relations between the Lillooet, Thompson, and Stó:lō are multiple, but more importantly both versions reveal that Xéylxelemòs is not just a rock, but an ancestor.

²⁶ Xelháhl, which means "injured person" in Halkomelem is a settlement site adjacent to Lady Franklin Rock just upriver from Yale. Boas, 108 footnote 77; Carlson, *Atlas*, 152.

²⁷ Boas, 108. Boas also mentions Beaver (Sk:Elā'ō), the first chief of Spuzzum, digging an "underground passage" to Xéylxelemòs' house. This passageway could refer to the tunnel that McHalsie discussed in his version of the story.

²⁸ Boas, 108 footnote 78.

²⁹ Hill-Tout, 128.

In conjunction with ideas of ancestral connection, Jo-Anne Archibald has described transformer sites and all natural things and beings as *sí:le* or grandparents in Halkomelem, stressing a familial bond even without an explicit link through ancestral names. At a Coqualeetza Elders meeting in the spring of 1982, Archibald recalls Elizabeth Phillips confirming that mountains were *sí:le* and another woman commenting that “All living things, they are *si:le*. And the rocks too, even the little rocks. Everything there is *si:le*, to be respected.”³⁰ Not only does the use of the word *sí:le* attest to familial connection to transformer sites, but reinforces the obligation of respect for all living things as elders.

In his article McHalsie demonstrates that the word *shxwelí* describes a similar relationship between humans and nature. *Shxwelí* means spirit or life force and each living thing has *shxwelí*: “everything has that spirit and everything’s connected through that.”³¹ In a conversation with McHalsie, the late Rosaleen George described *shxwelí* as follows:

She put her hand on her chest and she said, “*Shxwelí* is inside us here.” And she put her hand in front of her and she said, “*Shxwelí* is in your parents.” She raised her hand higher and said, “then your grandparents, your great-grandparents, it’s in your great-great-grandparents. It’s in the rocks, it’s in the trees, it’s in the grass, it’s in the ground. *Shxwelí* is everywhere.”³²

The transformer rocks contain the *shxwelí* of the ancestors that were transformed, a life force that connects the sites to *Stó:lō* people. McHalsie adds, “we’re connected it to it; we need to take care of that place [transformer sites].”³³ Being connected through *shxwelí* translates into respect and the responsibility to look after the transformer sites. Schaepe also comments on the role of *shxwelí* and ancestral connections to transformer sites: “The *Stó:lō* fundamentally maintain that not only are all ‘natural’ things alive and animated by a life force (*shxwelí*) but also that, in many

³⁰ Bierwert, 64.

³¹ McHalsie, *We Have to Take Care*, 103.

³² *Ibid*, 104.

³³ *Ibid*, 105-106.

cases, they are *ancestral*; that is, they are linked to the contemporary community through the transformative acts of *Xexá:ls*, the Transformers.”³⁴ The presence of *shxwelí* is foundational to *Xexá:ls* stories of the Canyon and I argue, constitutes a kinship obligation to transformer sites and the Canyon itself.

Kinship, I argue is one of the main structures of significance in *Xexá:ls* stories of the Canyon and is a teaching that is carried on and passed down without being prescriptive of behaviour and actions. Daniel Heath Justice in his work on Kinship Criticism has defined kinship as “something that’s *done* more than something that simply *is*.”³⁵ He views kinship as an active obligation, not a passive tie: a verb instead of a noun. Justice argues that kinship “gives us the best measure of interpretive possibility, as it speaks to the fact that our literatures, like our various peoples, are *alive*.”³⁶ Stories define relationships and in turn provide “an understanding of a common social interdependence within the community, the tribal web of kinship rights and responsibilities that link the People, the land, and the cosmos together in an ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships.”³⁷ Kinship Criticism is an appropriate literary framework to apply to Stó:lō *Xexá:ls* stories, because it reinforces the integral role of ancestral connection and *shxwelí*, acknowledging traditional Stó:lō beliefs as living and active. In an environmental context, kinship is the obligation Stó:lō people have to take care of the land. Stó:lō people cannot know the land outside of their relationship to it. Kinship exists in familial and ancestral lineages, but also in relation to history, neighbouring tribes, community, power,

³⁴ Schaepe, 253.

³⁵ Daniel Heath Justice, “Go Away Water!”: *Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative*, in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, eds. Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2008), 150.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 150-151.

and features of the landscape. Each of the stories I have found about the Canyon contains a teaching about kinship and with it the obligation to attend to kinship bonds.

Many versions of the Canyon stories incorporate personal experiences that attach contemporary significance to transformer sites through time. As Bierwert remarks, many ancestral teachings are combined with recent reports of a place, “link[ing] transformational events of the past with extraordinary events of the present world.”³⁸ Integrating the present into the past reveals historical influence on the contemporary world. A common oral formula used in Xexá:ls Canyon stories is “which may still be seen,”³⁹ “I’ve seen the rock,”⁴⁰ “stone is still there,”⁴¹ etc. This convention reinforces the truth of and physically situates the stories, but also makes reference to the present day, reinforcing the continued impact and importance of Xexá:ls transformations. Ideally, these stories are told at the physical transformation sites where the formula adjusts to “that rock there,” more effectively demonstrating the impact of ancient times on the present. The story establishes a relationship to the past and ancient history for the listener, promoting respect and ultimately a kinship bond to that history. The transformer stories teach Stó:lō history and, as Seymour expressed, the importance of “knowing your history.”⁴²

As previously noted in the Xéylxelemòs story, Xexá:ls stories teach the importance of kinship to surrounding communities and peoples, but they also teach the importance of kinship to surrounding geographic features and animals. One such story was told to Duff by Charlie of a whale transformation called Qwél:es just above Í:yem: “When water is low, can see head of whale in rocks.”⁴³ McHalsie related this transformation to one in Harrison Lake of a whale that

³⁸ Bierwert, 83.

³⁹ Teit, 129.

⁴⁰ Bob, 8.

⁴¹ Charlie, Book #1, 2.

⁴² Seymour interview.

⁴³ Charlie, Book #2, 4.

came up the lake from the ocean during high water.⁴⁴ The whale rock reminds people that the Fraser River is a tributary to the ocean, and of the kinship and mutually affecting relationship the river has with the ocean and its animals. The story also potentially reminds people of a time of imbalance; the whale could be a symbol of the delicate nature of ecological balance. The whale has spiritual significance in many West Coast tribes⁴⁵ and its presence in Stó:lō territory may be another allusion to cross-tribal relationships as well.

Xexá:ls stories of the Canyon also teach the importance of relationships within a community and an individual's responsibility and obligation to his/her community over personal interests. McHalsie's retelling of the transformation of a woman and her two children (told to him by Elders Agnes Kelly, Tilly and Alan Gutierrez, and Bailey Douglas) reinforces the value of sharing and not thinking of oneself above others. During a time of famine a woman catches a salmon, does not share it with her community, and instead keeps it for herself and her two children. Xexá:ls punishes them by turning them into stone on the hillside across from Yale.⁴⁶ Out of all the stories in the canyon, this one seems to have a fairly clear, didactic lesson that promotes sharing; however, the larger structure of significance is the mindfulness of community that this story communicates as well. At the center of this story is the overall obligation of kinship to community.

Transformer stories of the Canyon provide a relational framework for interacting with power as well. In addition to the teachings McHalsie associates with the Xéylxelemòs story,

⁴⁴ McHalsie mentioned the Flood of 1948 where the Harrison River ran backward, because the Fraser was so high as an example. (McHalsie interview)

⁴⁵ For example, in Haida culture the Killer Whale is the power of the ocean incarnate and the primary visible form of spirit-beings. Bringhurst, 122 and 248.

⁴⁶ McHalsie interview. Patrick Charlie and Dave Johnny both talked about another transformation in roughly the same area of two women. Charlie said that you can still see their faces on the rock and Johnny told Gutierrez, "right back at the other side of the tunnel at Yale they say there's two rocks like this shaped just like two women, and this man used to hypnotise the people that were fighting and the only people we see are those two women, that were climbing the mountains there he just done this to his hand, he hypnotise them and they became rock they say it's still there, but I never see it myself." Charlie, 3; Johnny, 3-4.

Bierwert interprets the transformation as a warning against dangerous power and the potential for power to exist within ourselves and others.⁴⁷ She gathers this interpretation from Sweetie Malloway’s version of the tale: “As we sit at her fishing place in 1992, Sweetie tells me, ‘there used to be an old Indian doctor there, gesturing at the rock. He was killing people with his power. So they put him there, he’s in the rock. You can still see him, his eye.’”⁴⁸ As McHalsie mentioned, the presence of *Xéylxelemòs*’ eye and the possibility of *xo:lí:s*, “twisting up and dying,”—or to be “bent over backward” or “laid out”⁴⁹ as Mrs. August Jim describes it in an interview with Oliver Wells in 1962—is a teaching of the consequences of not doing what you are told.⁵⁰ While *xo:lí:s* may seem like a didactic lesson enforced by fierce punishment, I believe that the story also promotes awareness of the dangers of power and the need to respect it. For children perhaps the story teaches, “do what you are told,” but for an adult this story seems to convey certain sensibilities in interpersonal relationships. *Xo:lí:s* potentially teaches a certain amount of humility, asking people to realize their own fallibility against larger powers and know when to avoid confrontation. Above all, the story teaches people not to abuse power. Each person applies this knowledge in a variety of different situations in their life, but the story establishes a relationship to power and the responsibility to be careful, “warn[ing] us that such danger still lives in the world” and of “the possibility of finding a ‘fixing eye’ within ourselves as well.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Bierwert, 71.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁹ Jim, 64.

⁵⁰ McHalsie interview.

⁵¹ Bierwert, 71.

The story of S'ch'e:il,⁵² Xéylxelemòs' sister also establishes a relationship to power, the power and force of the river. Bob Joe told this story to both Duff in 1950 and Wells in 1964, but described the whirlpool as the Indian doctor's wife:

While waiting, saw woman across, this man's wife. She had power that helped her husband (name given, but forgotten). Xexals got the woman "You'll go over there and be there for the rest of your time. If any of the coming gen. [generations] will travel over you, they are liable to lose their lives through you." She's there now, almost middle of river.⁵³

And to Wells, Joe explained, "And the man's wife, this man that is supposed to come down at that time took this woman and threw her in the river. Well, this time of year you see the water boiling where this woman is supposed to be at."⁵⁴ Even though her relationship to Xéylxelemòs changes from sister to wife in Joe's version,⁵⁵ the teaching remains the same as in McHalsie's telling. The story provides an explanation for, and a reason to respect and be careful around the whirlpool. The personification of the whirlpool establishes a relationship to S'ch'e:il and in return a relationship to the river itself. The story offers discursive relationality for Stó:lō people to understand their place on the land and in the world.

Each of the Xexá:ls stories of the Canyon contributes to kinship relationships to the land. Stories recognize connection to transformer rocks through shxwelí, acknowledge their role as ancestors and sí:le, and position them as symbols of history, ecological balance, community, and the dangers of power, both in people and in nature. Steven Point has referred to this symbol or mark as an inscription of Xexá:ls teachings. The root of Xexá:ls is 'xal' meaning to write in

⁵² McHalsie has heard a version of the salmon woman story where S'ch'e:il was the salmon woman and Xexá:ls created a storm, blew her into the air, and spun her around and down into the water where she was turned to stone. (McHalsie interview)

⁵³ Joe, interviewed by Duff, 28.

⁵⁴ Bob Joe, interviewed by Oliver Wells, in *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbors* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987), 121.

⁵⁵ Joe also mentioned that Xéylxelemòs' canoe was transformed as well. To Duff he described that Xéylxelemòs "had got close to his canoe, which is up on its edge against the rock. There is moss on his back and on canoe. Anytime it's hot, scrape moss off back and rain will come or clouds will come in." Joe, interviewed by Duff, 28.

Halkomelem; therefore, each transformation is the inscription of Xexá:ls describing Stó:lō people's responsibility to the land.⁵⁶ These writings do not prescribe how to take care of the environment, but define relationality to the land through story. A story 'reads' each transformer stone, interpreting Xexá:ls teachings to Stó:lō people and each reading produces a slightly different interpretation over time. As a conduit for comprehending relationality to the natural world, stories cannot hold a static, singular meaning; they must evolve and adapt over time to new and changing contexts. Bierwert comments on how some scholars are confused by transformer stories as they contain ancestral relations between people and land, but are historically mutable.⁵⁷ However, I argue that historical mutability is what allows these stories to actively maintain ancestral relations between people and land. For example, Susan Peters in an interview with Roy Point as part of the Stó:lō Heritage Project in 1972 referred to Xexá:ls as "Little Christ"⁵⁸: a translation, which has an obvious Christian influence. And Dave Johnny, in an interview with Gutierrez as part of the same project, spoke of Xexá:ls transformations as "hypnosis,"⁵⁹ a thought-provoking translation choice that contains a certain Western influence, but also adds a psychological aspect to transformation. As translations, these adaptations help communicate to Christian and Western sensibilities the spiritual dimension and power Xexá:ls embodies. Such adaptation allows stories to continue living and being told, leaving them open for future mobilization and use. Stories are used to actively attend to kinship bonds with the land. Telling stories helps fulfill the obligation of kinship to the land by establishing a relationship between the listener and the land features.

⁵⁶ McHalsie interview; Bierwert, 73.

⁵⁷ Bierwert, 72.

⁵⁸ Peters, 1.

⁵⁹ Johnny, 3.

Viewing X̱ex̱á:ls stories of the Fraser Canyon through a literary framework ensures that larger structures of significance and embedded sensibilities are not lost, but kept alive. A literary framework reveals the interconnected web of kinship relations between Stó:lō people and the land, ensuring that the ecology of the Canyon is balanced and healthy. These stories teach how to be a good person by establishing relationships to transformer sites and strengthening Stó:lō people's responsibility to attend to those kinship bonds. This teaching cannot be prescriptive, because it must be adaptive. Justice describes kinship as "what we do for family"⁶⁰; there are no set rules or lessons for how to take care of family. Family is complicated, messy, and each one is different, but above all, we have an active, committed responsibility to family. X̱ex̱á:ls stories of the Canyon extend notions of family and kinship to include the environment and show Stó:lō people their responsibility and commitment to take care of it. Part of understanding these stories comes from attending to bonds of kinship with the land, walking the land, being on the land, and being respectful of the land. Stó:lō people also have a responsibility and a kinship connection to the stories themselves to ensure their multiplicity, complexity, and richness is not reduced or forgotten. As McHalsie ended our interview, "I have to look after [these stories] as a member of the Stó:lō people."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Justice, 167.

⁶¹ McHalsie interview.

Appendix A

Albert “Sonny” McHalsie’s Version of the Xéylxelemòs story:

So the story actually starts with Xéylxelemòs and well Xexá:ls travelling up through the, just past, well almost to Lady Franklin Rock. And the first transformation he does is with his cane, or his walking stick. So it’s called Q’awa. And so, he got to that turn and he shoved his stick in the ground, transformed it into stone, and then he continued walking. And when he got to the river bank on the east side just opposite downriver end of Lady Franklin Rock, and he had heard about Xéylxelemòs. Xéylxelemòs was a shxwlá:m or Indian Doctor from Xelhálh who used his powers the wrong way. So, what he did was he used his powers to benefit himself. Okay, because today when you ask any shxwlá:m for help or if you ask any spiritual worker like Hihiyeqwels, you’re not allowed to hire them, like you can’t use that word otherwise it’s insulting them. And same with you’re not allowed to pay them and they’re not allowed to charge you neither. So, that’s why we’re very careful today when we ask them for their help. We usually use that word, we ask them to help us or that we need their help. And so, we don’t say, “can we hire you,” you know, or anything, we don’t use those words. And same with when we’re thanking them. We say this is our way of thanking you and you know of course in our culture when you’re given something you can’t turn it down, right? So that’s how it’s done today. And so, this fellow then, Xéylxelemòs was using his power to benefit himself; he was getting rich off of his power. So Xexá:ls had heard about him and he decided he wanted to set an example of him. So he went, called for Xéylxelemòs and he found out that Xéylxelemòs was actually up in

Spuzzum visiting some of his relatives. So Xexá:ls called for him, but Xéylxelemòs wouldn't come down to do battle with him. And so that's when Xexá:ls transformed Xéylxelemòs' sister, S'ch'e:il into stone to entice Xéylxelemòs to come down. So, once S'ch'e:il was transformed into stone, and once Xéylxelemòs found this out, then that's when he decided to come down and do battle. So he's supposed to have travelled through a tunnel from Spuzzum, came out of that tunnel just upriver right where the river turns, just on the Eastern side where the river turns North. North to South, East to West, right there, that turn. And he crossed over. So he came out of that tunnel, crossed over the river to the South side or the East side, East bank. And then he crossed, walked down and he sat on a rock across from where Xexá:ls was sitting. Xexá:ls was sitting at a place called, Th'exelís. Th'exelís means gritting his teeth, so right there, just opposite down the other end of Lady Franklin Rock, but on the West or North side. So Xéylxelemòs sat on the other side and Xexá:ls was on one side and then they started doing battle with each other. And at one point Xexá:ls cast a thunderbolt to Xéylxelemòs and the thunderbolt went into the rock. And so, you can still see that white vein of quartz rock. It's about two feet wide, about 80 feet long. And, but of course, he missed Xéylxelemòs with that thunderbolt. That's why it went into the rock. And then eventually...oh, each time Xexá:ls used his power, he put a scratch in the rock. So that's why when you go to that place there, Th'exelís, you'll see where he sat. There's that little dip where he sat and then you can see where he has his legs dangling over the bank, little dip there. And then on the right side you can see scratches from his right fingernail and left side scratches from his left side. So each time he used his power against Xéylxelemòs he put a scratch into the rock. So that place is called Th'exelís meaning gritting his teeth, because he was sitting there when he was using his powers, gritting his teeth at the same time, and also at the same time whistling too. So that's why you say that you can still see his whistle. When he whistles you can see the little waves in the water in the river, so they still call that Xexá:ls and that's Xexá:ls' breath when he's sitting there whistling, causing those little waves. So eventually he transformed Xéylxelemòs into stone and that's the big rock there that's known as Lady Franklin Rock. Xéylxelemòs was also known to have a third eye, a third eye on his forehead, so when he was transformed into stone his third eye was transformed into stone as well and it's on the south side or what you call the East bank side of the island. And we're not allowed to look at that rock otherwise we could suffer from what we call in our language xo:lís. Xo:lís is described by Rosaline and Elizabeth saying that if you're told not to do something, but you go and do it anyways, then you could suffer from that: suffer from twisting up or causing you to twist up and die from doing something you're not supposed to do. So that's what that eye is on the back of that mountain or that rock there. So that's the story of Xéylxelemòs, well a whole bunch of stories; it's Q'awa, Th'exelís, Xéylxelemòs, and S'ch'e:il. And I can't remember the Halkomelem word for the thunderbolt, but there's a word for that as well.⁶²

⁶² McHalsie interview.

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