

**‘Place’, personhood and claims in the contemporary Coast Salish world**  
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**Abstract**

Coast Salish sense of personhood is configured by place through individual and collective relationships with mythic stories, spirit power, and the ancestors. These senses of place run through contemporary expressions of property and territory that underlie Coast Salish land claims. Engaging an anthropology that pays careful attention to the way Coast Salish people attend to the experience and meanings of place, this paper examines the interplay of senses of place with the attendant relationships of power, community, territory and identity in which place are engaged.

**Introduction**

Land, and in particular certain kinds of distinctive places within the Coast Salish world are central if not essential to Coast Salish understandings of the nature of being. Experiencing place in these ways is central in situating, shaping and maintaining Coast Salish ontology. It would be difficult, nay impossible to practise ritual bathing, to acquire spirit powers, to encounter *stl'elugum* or to have respectful, direct relationships with non-humans such as rocks or transformed ancestors in the form of animals and trees without directly being on the land. It is this being, this dwelling in place that shapes and is shaped by Coast Salish ontology and worldview that is fundamental for personal beliefs and social institutions. Spirit power is enplaced in Coast Salish dwelling in place.

Ancestors and spirits form part of the experienced world in Coast Salish society. These beings may be encountered in dreams or visions. They may be invoked in story, song or dance. Their potential to dwell in places guides human actions. Ingold (2000: 1-465:14) has compared such spiritual and ancestral presences in the landscape to one’s parents, in that they provide personal growth, wisdom, nurturance, guidance, security and food in the hunter-gatherer world.

Experiences of ancestors and spirits in the land, when viewed as kinds of ‘persons’ who may have such parental features, necessitate that the living people who dwell among these other ‘persons’ have the *kinds* of relationships that they do with other active members of their society.

In Coast Salish communities, where face-to-face relationships, economies, and dependencies create a social fabric of respect, obligation, reciprocity, exchange and sharing, such relationships are also held with the land.

Places have the potential to hold spiritual power for those who are attuned to encountering it. The spirit quest in northern hunter-gatherer societies taps into the potential power that may be experienced through the relationships with the guardian spirits that dwell in the land (i.e. Ingold 2000: 89-110:93). The experience of these relationships often comes in dreams or during fasts or seclusion, when modes of sensory experience are attuned to the sorts of potentialities that the land – and those human and non-human beings who dwell in it – holds.

Spiritual and ancestral power can be transformative in nature. The rocks, mountain, forest or other places may be spirits or ancestors transformed to those places in mythical times or more recent experience. Such places are brought into being in legends and myth, but their powers may be encountered in more immediate experiences. Through the powers that still reside in these transformed places, such special rocks or other non-human beings encountered may act on people with important physical and social consequences. These transformed places may be experienced through sudden changes in weather, or may be observed when boulders are found to have moved or have worked to stay put. Such powerful ancestral figures become part of the social world with whom relations of reciprocity and respect are engaged.

### **Spirit Power Emplaced**

An important aspect of Coast Salish ontology is the idea that ‘spirit power’ is emplaced in the land. By emplaced, I mean that spiritual power (*s’uylu*) may be encountered dwelling in a place, nestled within particular Coast Salish landscapes.

All things have the potential to have the agency of a person. Personhood is open to both humans and non-humans (Ingold 1996: 117-155:131). In the time reckoned by Coast Salish people as being when the *sxwi’em’* and *syuth* took place, all non-humans beings were people (Collins 1952: 353-359). Non-humans who dwell in the Coast Salish world always have the potential for

their personhood to be encountered as a form of spirit power. Non-human and human persons “are not impartial observers of nature but participate from within the continuum of organic life” (Ingold 2000: 89-110:90). In the Coast Salish world, like that of the Ojibwa hunters of the Canadian boreal forest, these non-human persons “can be encountered not only in waking life but also... in dreams and in the telling of myth” (Ingold 2000: 89-110:91). The dream experiences, and the narrative structure and elements of the myths drawn on are informed by personal and cultural experiences in the land – not just any land, but in particular places. Dreams and stories both shape a storied landscape and are simultaneously shaped by the experience of it. It is this range of phenomenal experiences that reinforces the power of these non-human ancestors as participants in Coast Salish quotidian life.

Non-human persons in Island Hul’qumi’num myth and everyday experience can change form with ease and in many guises. The ontological basis for this power to transform resides in the idea that everything has a soul and a corporeal frame, the latter of which can undergo transformation without deprivation of the soul (Jenness 1935:106-107). But, as in other hunter-gatherer cultures, “only the most powerful human persons, such as sorcerers and shamans can change into a non-human form and make it back again, and then only with some danger and difficulty ... For most humans, metamorphosis means death” (Ingold 2000: 89-110:93). This idea is reflected in the stories where *Xeel’s*, perhaps the most powerful of humans, changes people permanently into stone who never return. The spirits of these transformed persons continue to dwell and rest in the place they were transformed. This presence and strength of spirit is attested to in people’s narratives of encounters with sentient rocks, abundant creatures in particular places, or even the *stl’eluum* (or ‘monsters’) that inhabit certain locations in the Coast Salish world.

People are circumspect and sometimes fearful of encounters with the strongest of these non-human persons. They represent the power to transform a person’s life completely. If the person who encounters this power is not ready or strong enough, it could mean death. However, if a person is able to manage such transformational power, he will have access to a wider range of “practical possibilities of being, and hence the more extensive the breadth of their experience

and the scope of their phenomenal presence” (Ingold 2000: 89-110:94).

Transformed ancestors have a practical and real importance in the lives of Coast Salish people today, “since the spirit inhabitants of the land contribute to human well-being equally and on the same footing as do human forbearers, providing both food, guidance and security, they too... are ancestors of a sort, albeit ones that are alive and active in the present” (Ingold 2000: 132-151:141). Coast Salish people are concerned with ancestral relations with these non-human persons. They take wisdom from the spirit of the land, through the encounters with these beings throughout their lives.

To be successful in life as a Coast Salish person, one must be able to have an enhanced vision to sense the world or ability to control cosmic forces that influence everyday events. Such distinctive Coast Salish successes are seen in a multitude of forms, from an karmic luck in hunting or fishing, to successes in preparing and applying medicines, to accomplished skills in creating masterwork goods and crafts. To do these things well, an individual must establish a relationship with the non-human world. This relationship is formed between a person and their non-human counterpart during a vision quest encounter or while seeking their *seyowun* (spirit song) as an initiate in the winter ceremonial. A person looking for their non-human *s'uylu* or helper, Suttles argued, has “to leave the human part of this world and try to enter the non-human part. Wilderness – places away from humans – provided the essential setting” (1981: 698-716:712; see also Kew 1990: 476-480:447-448; Mohs 1994: 184-208:197).

Encounters with such spirit power may occur in many places throughout the Coast Salish world. Common, but not everywhere, it has the potential to be anywhere. Just as people should be circumspect and respectful to each other as they do not know what kinds of spirit power others might have over them, they should have the same attitude towards places (and other non-human things like animals, or fish).

#### *Encountering Shamanic Power at Stl'eluwum Places*

In Coast Salish oral tradition, *stl'eluwum* are associated with the land itself, and an experience

with one is tied directly to the kind of place encountered. These beings, and their place in the land, are an important facet of Coast Salish ontology and experience of the land.

On two occasions Simon Charlie told of his encounter with the *stl'eluwum* which became his spirit helper (or at least one of them) when he was a young man. The two narratives focus on different aspects of the encounter. The first frames how Simon followed the instructions of a powerful Indian Doctor in questing for a spirit helper. The second emphasizes the location of his encounter. Each time Simon told the story of his encounter with the *stl'eluwum*, he emphasized the difficulty of the experience and how important the experience has been for his success as a carver and an artist.

When Simon started to talk about his encounter, I was surprised as I had been told by younger people that it is not proper or indeed is dangerous to openly reveal the source of one's power. Doing so could be interpreted by the spirit as boasting or otherwise being disrespectful and could risk the power diminishing or becoming 'spirit sick' if the spirit chooses to leave (Amoss 1978:52). Simon does indicate that encounters with spirit power are not supposed to be discussed, but excuses himself because he is old. Being a man in his late 80s, he was comfortable talking about his encounter; it seems to be appropriate for the senior generation to teach others about their experiences in these matters, the relationship with the spirit having been well established over a long life. On a number of occasions, Simon discussed with me how he wanted to share what he knew about the traditions and practices of the Coast Salish people. However, in the spirit of respect and circumspection, I have edited out of Simon's narratives certain very personal details which seem from a Coast Salish perspective more appropriately kept private.

I recall these stories here to demonstrate another important way in which the land may be experienced by Coast Salish people who receive and practice the training of their ancestors. My central point is that certain places become powerful centres for developing influential, life-long relationships with the non-human world. I have heard of such relationships with *stl'eluwum* developing only from being on the land and believe that from a Coast Salish view *stl'eluwum*

places are absolutely integral to the experience of *stl'eluwum* themselves.

The first time Simon talked about his experience, he discussed the spirit quest of his mentor who received power from *sxwuxwa'us*, the Thunderbird. Following his mentor's instructions of what to do in certain secluded areas away from his village, Simon had a nightmare-like experience, encountering a *stl'eluwum* in the form of a giant snake. The experience left him shaken and cautious about teaching his own children about how to have such an encounter.

The different people, groups, go to different places. And my ancestor from Koksilah village, he went and made friends with Thunderbird up on that Mountain up there.

There's a little hole up there, and he wanted to make friends with Thunderbird. So he kept going. Bathing. And every year he'd get closer. Fourth year he made it. He'd get blown away at a certain area, he'd get blown away from it. But the fourth year he got there and he went in, and he blacked out, and he woke up near the Koksilah River.

So he crawled down and he was behind a log when somebody was coming down with a load of wood. So he hollered. And the guy thought he heard something, so he looked back and all he could see was a hand. They backed the canoe ashore and went to him and *Shyaquthut* [the name of Simon's ancestor] asked them to bring him home. "I can't pay you now but when I have my potlatch I will be on the platform and you holler at me and I'll pay you." So he did.

So I went and done this bathing. I have my stepmother to thank. And her father was August Jack from Westholme and he was one of the last Indian doctors. When he got there I asked him. I asked from her father to tell me how to go about bathing. So he did. And he told me what to do, so I done it. It was a lot of fun in the beginning [laughs]. At two places, oh it was like a nightmare.

I used to do it when I first got married, I used to go trapping. I would go out at five o'clock in the morning and I'd get home at nine o'clock at night. Tiring.

And then I got to one place there and looked at it, and I was interested. And he told me "If you see a place with no running water but, you see the gravel, it's just like if the water's moving. You be careful if you see that. Spit on a rock and throw it in. If you see, like when it's windy and the water, you'll see a little thing moving around." And I seen that and it went back but, I was still interested.

The third day I went. You couldn't look away, you had to go and back away until you were out of sight. And before you go in, you get out anything that's around

the area, rub it on yourself so you'll smell like the same place, you know. The third night I dreamt I woke up. I heard a big voice telling me I wasn't interested in this person. And a woman showed up, had long hair. But, whether I was interested or not she was going to come to me anyways and she come around that little pool. Just like a blink she turned into a great big snake about 35 feet long and it come in and went in my neck and I was trying to hold her back, you know. I was sweating and oh I couldn't sleep. [Laughs]

So I didn't tell my young people, you know, my son. I didn't tell him 'cause of that. It was no good, they went and done it anyway. [CS-ii:522-557]

Simon introduces his experience talking about the encounter that his ancestor *Shyaquthut* from Koksilah had with the Thunderbird in a cave in a mountain. This ancestor sought out the Thunderbird but was thwarted for several years until he finally reached the cave, blacked out, and was picked up and brought home by travellers. The encounter foreshadows Simon's own encounter with another powerful *stl'eluum* creature.

When Simon received training from the Indian Doctor August Jack, he learned that a certain kind of watery, gravelly place could be a likely place for a spirit encounter. Like his ancestor, Simon approached such a place three times before having an encounter. The experience was not something to take lightly, nor was it something that anybody would necessarily do, as a *stl'eluum* is a strong power to encounter. Simon's story underscores the point made by Ingold that cultural knowledge is gained by movement through the world, engaging the experiences of one's ancestors, and that the words, concepts and narratives take their meaning from such experiences (2000: 132-151:146).

If... the source of cultural knowledge lies... in the world that they [one's predecessors] point out to you – if, that is, one learns by discovery while following in the *path* of an ancestor – then words, too, must gather their meanings from the contexts in which they are uttered. Moving together along a trail or encamped at a particular place, companions draw each other's attention, through speech and gesture, to salient features of their shared environment. Every word, spoken in context, condenses a history of past usage into a focus that illuminates some aspect of the world. Words, in this sense, are instruments of perception...

In the case of Simon's story, the parallel noticed between his own experience and the action of his ancestor was crucial for making sense of the encounter with the *stl'eluum*. Knowledge of

*stl'eluqum* experiences from the training by his ancestor, and physical presence in particular places on the land, provided the context for the vision to be encountered. This experience, and the narration of it, reflects how I have come to understand the notion of Coast Salish people dwelling in the land.

The second time Simon told his story, we were discussing the importance of *kw'aythut* places. He provided more details of his encounter with the *stl'eluqum* snake and the power it gave him to become a canoe maker and a carver, and by implication his success in these aspects of his life.

There's a sacred place you could think of. Once you get into it, you can feel the different places. Then you can go in. When you first start you don't know what's in there. But once you get into it, and you know where to go.

I used to do a lot of trapping when I bathe, here and there. I got there, and August Jack told me that if you find a place with still water, and you see the rocks, no green stuff in it, be careful. You spit on the rock and throw it in. If you see little things coming out, especially when it's windy, if you see little things moving – then it comes out and back – don't go in. Before you bathe, you rub yourself with anything around the area, then you smell like them. [Laughs].

So I done that, and then I backed away, then I went there. That night I dreamt about it. [Simon describes in detail his encounter with the *stl'eluqum*]. Then I woke up. Oh! What is it? [Laughs.] So I got that, you're not supposed to tell. But I'm old enough. I can tell.

Yeah, that's where if you have a big snake for a helper then you can carve anything, fancy carvings. If you have the garter snake, it will be plain. That's the other one, if you have that for a helper you can be a canoe builder, carver. [Laughs].[CS-iii:965-1021]

Simon evokes a very intense sense of place in this story of his experience with the *stl'eluqum*, describing how a person can 'feel' sacred places once they are properly prepared and they know where to go. Another appropriate place might be, according to his mentor August Jack, a still body of water, without algae, where 'little things' emerge from the rocks if the water is spit in, especially when it is windy. Such a place is much rarer than a place typically used to *kw'aythut*. The description of a still but clear pool evokes a mythic inversion, where the world is opposite to what is commonly experienced. To enter into such a place and have a dream encounter with a



*stl' eluqum*, one must become a part of the place, transforming the scent of the body itself with plants found nearby. For Simon, this transformation gave him the unique gifts of the master carver that he retained to the end of his life.

### **Coast Salish Territories**

In the normative mode of ethnographic descriptions of land tenure systems, Coast Salish territories may be conceived of as being an area of jurisdiction of groups of tightly interrelated property-owning descent and residence groups. Key jurisdictions include the exercise of symbolic control of territories through naming places and reifying legitimacy of storied landscapes; the exercise of physical control of territories through excluding 'outsiders', and tight individual control of highly local ecological and ritual knowledge related to the land and resources. Cartographically these territories strongly tend to map onto areas within the watersheds of places where residence groups have common property or alternately where multiple residence groups share a language, dialect or micro-dialect. In such a community of kin where language or dialect is shared and the region of control is discrete, such as a watershed or an island area, I have heard these areas referred to as 'core' territories. In places amicably used, occupied or related to by members of neighbouring residence groups who share tightly bound kin networks, and where these networks crosscut language or dialect communities, shared, jointly held territories result.

Coast Salish people frame property relations through encounters with ancestral figures in the land. Such encounters are mediated by their spiritual and ritual practices and through evoking mythological landscapes in stories. The ancestral quality of hereditary personal names and named places further order and define grounded social relationships of property. Relations with these ancestral figures require reciprocity, sharing and respect with other persons, including both human and non-human people who are located and associated with place. They create and reinforce property relations where the land at once belongs to the ancestors who dwell there, and belongs to those living today who encounter the ancestors in it. People in the Coast Salish world organize their property relations with each other by residence in ancestral communities, or descent from ancestors connected to particular places, drawing authority from their association

of historical and mythical privileges handed down from the ancestors and learned by engaging in respectful spirit relations with the non-human persons in the land.

Such a conception of indigenous territories bring into focus social relationships of individuals interacting at the scale of communities. Individuals experience their territories as 'itineraries' of places, engaging in reciprocal practices relating to their use and respect of the land (Scott 1986: 163-173;1988: 35-51;Poirier 2001: 98-116:107) within an ecosystem that they continually appropriate (Escobar 1998: 53-82:71). These relationships with territory become aspects of a person's social identity "which may define him or her for a variety of social relationships within a wider system of organization" (Myers 1988: 261-282:271). Such forms of hunter-gatherer relationships to territory persist even in contexts where powerful western states work to undermine them (Tanner 1979: 1-238;1983: 311-320;1986: 19-35;Morantz 1986: 64-91;Scott 2001: 3-20).

Property relations in the kinds of indigenous cultural settings described above have different forms than in the dominant western discourse (Ingold 1987: 222-242:226-7). Indigenous property relations are firmly wrapped in mythological and other social and historical relationships to land that are not easily separated as they are in mainstream western thought. Property from this perspective of dwelling is not so much a *commodity* (though aspects can be), as it is a way of ordering kin relations, and relationships of sharing. Bird-David (1999: s67-s91:s.76) has argued that a 'relational epistemology' of this kind has authority in hunter-gatherer societies where sharing is normalized, people are intimate with their environment, animistic performances (such as the Coast Salish winter dance) are celebrated and supernatural forces are encountered as friendly helpers or kin.

## **Conclusions**

Coast Salish notions of property in land, including individual or common titles and territory, are expressions of aspects of economic, social and symbolic relations between people, embedded in Coast Salish understandings of being-in-the-world. Property relationships are a central connecting node between the various phenomenally experienced engagements with place and the

experiences and structures of power between people at and between these places. Relationships of power, relationships of property, relationships of territory all intersect importantly in place, just as memory, identity, myth, and kin do. These things are dynamically important elements of indigenous attachments to land (Scott et al 1999: 146-176:150).

Just as story and myth telling, vision questing, spirit dancing and singing, hunting and fishing, plant gathering, spirit dancing and singing are all ways of engaging in the reciprocal relationships of respect with non-human beings, who dwell alongside humans in the land, claiming the land has become a central feature of contemporary Coast Salish cultural practice. A spiritual bather is at once claiming the land while she engages a spiritual relationship with the beings and ancestors within it. Responsibility to the land, to the ancestors, to other Coast Salish people, and to one's own cultural identity are wrapped in these kinds of engagements with the land in the Coast Salish world. From this view, land claims are as much about engaging and being-in-the-world as hunting, fishing and myth telling. The lawyer or negotiator who evokes the practice of spirit bathing in land claim talks is drawing on the power of the very act to establish and legitimize the claim.

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