

Wearing Mountain Goat's robe: attending to proper relations with the land in a Coast Salish world

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The association of the late Vi taq^wšəblu Hilbert, (1918-2008) Lushootseed Elder and champion of the dx^wləšucid language, with a twined mountain goat wool robe named "Sacred Change For Each Other" suggests much about Coast Salish engagement with mountain goats, both in spiritual realms and earthly places. Examined in relation to Ingold's concept of enskilment and Serres' discussion of the 'fold,' her engagement can inform and expand our understanding of the concept of ecography. taq^wšəblu often discussed the importance of careful observation as a basis for respectful relations with others, including non-human persons. This attention may include long contemplation of the movements of a given animal (or plant, or weather entity); its social relations; its specific, special abilities, and descriptions through Story and/or associated songs. Such local, emergent and partially stabilized concepts of relationship underlie the work that ecographers such as taq^wšəblu do to make places, and their inhabitants' actions, intelligible to others.

1 Working through Serres to Young-Leslie's concept of "ecography"

This paper was written to test the idea of "the ecographer" (Young-Leslie 2007)¹ — the previously unlooked-for individual who mobilizes resources in a way that is not that of a 'big man' or any kind of a 'great man' leader, nor even a culture broker, but instead, is one who works with, not 'against' the flow of ideas and events, with a sense of current events, past times, and potentials, and one who can take the long view of things. An ecographer is not necessarily one who is old, but one who is intently mindful of history, and possibility, who can imagine trajectories beyond their own lifetime. As Young-Leslie explains, ecography refers to "the inscription of human history and agency in a place and its inhabitants, and a mutual reinscription of land, sea, and dwellers into human lives, by way of place names, emplaced stories, ceremonial titles, and remembered ritual" (2007:366).

¹The term "ecography" first appears in publication in *A Fishy Romance: Chieftly Power and the Geopolitics of Desire*. The Contemporary Pacific 19(2)1: 365-408 Spring 2007.

The ecographer, as noted by Jamon Halvaksz (Halvaksz and Young-Leslie 2007), is one who moves lightly across the folds of “the strange,” as they are exemplified in Michel Serres’ analysis of “Hermes” as a metaphor for understanding the possibility of engaging across multiple planes of time and space to establish new connections, and new understandings through juxtapositions. Serres provides us with a way of understanding, without unpleating, some of this through his depiction of “The Baker” and the baker’s transformation of dough:

“a certain folding of half a plane of dough over the other half, repeated indefinitely according to a simple rule [...] He (the baker) makes folds, he *implicates* something that his movements then *explicate*. The most simple and mundane of gestures can produce very complicated curves.”

Serres with Latour [1995: 65]

And so it is with the folds that could be traced to follow this notion of ecography. Perhaps it is best, as we might observe the baker, to use our own ethnographic observation of the one who makes these folds, the one who finds the ways to incorporate, stretch taut, enfold, and create sustenance out of action. Perhaps attending to the baker’s, or the ecographer’s, movements quite closely, will allow us to see how the ecographer, too, engages multiple planes simultaneously.

As I understand the conceptualization, the ecographer is someone at the centre of a coalescence, which could be: a disaster of the weather; a war; or a sudden meeting of several cultures, a place-time configuration where necessary responses require imagining entirely new relationships with reference to past principles and practices. In order to further test out this way of examining engagement for myself, I had to take a leap from Young-Leslie’s description of an ecographer as positioned in the world, to see what such a posited ecographer would *do* in the world.² In other words, I had to find the actor from my own experience whose elegant movements and steady ethic might allow an active observation of this process of ecographizing in a way that can be systematically considered. I had to do this in order to test the model and the applicability of the identifier, ecographer, to real-world practitioners outside of the frames of reference that Halvaksz and Young-Leslie (2007) can comfortably inhabit in their own ethnography. And this is where I come to Vi taq’šəblu Hilbert, as the wearer of mountain goat’s robe.

² Moving away from the South Pacific world where the ecography concept was originally developed, the Waswanipi fur traders and trappers and their engagement with their European counterparts could provide a helpful example, as found in Feit’s (2004) description of the deployment of a Waswanipi Cree ethical position, as holding that people must be communicated with, shared with, and must not be turned away. In explaining this ethical principle, Feit is able to shed some light on a situation in which some Waswanipi Cree would be willing to cut a deal with Hydro-Quebec, at the same time as they try to alleviate the potential harm Hydro-Quebec could do. Feit examines the straightforwardness of the ethic, which like the baker’s clean movements (after Serres 1995), produces a most complex pattern of interrelations.

2 taqʷsəblu

Vi Hilbert was born in 1918 to Charley and Louise Anderson. She was the only one of their eight children to survive and so to come to know a Salish society that valued the social connections of brothers, sisters, and cousins. She grew up surrounded by adults, members of the *Seyowin* dancing society and the Indian Shaker Church, with their eyes always fixed on turning her into a proper human being, and a proper ‘person’ as well. She also went to fourteen schools in her twelve years accompanying her father and mother to logging camps, including time at Chemawa Indian School and two years as a boarder in a Portland city school, in order to learn skills including bookkeeping. She became a champion for her first language, as the founder of Lushootseed Research, the nonprofit organization dedicated to the appreciation of the Lushootseed (Puget Salish) language, including through the publication of books in the language, through Lushootseed Research Press, and to the commemoration of the sʷyəyəhub, or Stories, told in that language, which has only a few fluent speakers.³ Vi’s passion for living the teachings handed down in Lushootseed Stories has led to remarkable acts, including the commissioning of a symphony honoring the spirit power songs of her elders,⁴ raising a son of no small consequence in the art world,⁵ and a daughter who is a dedicated educator, and mentoring numerous others, including academics in linguistics and anthropology, myself included. Vi’s contributions were marked by a number of honours, including being named “Washington State Living Treasure” (1989) and receiving a National Heritage Fellowship from the US National Endowment of the Arts. The latter honour was presented on The Mall in Washington, DC, by then-President Bill Clinton, in 1994. She is also the wearer of a traditional name, bestowed with the customary distribution of wealth in the longhouse. Yet, when she was alive, she would describe herself, first and foremost, as a great-great grandmother. taqʷsəblu, or Vi Hilbert, was one who danced lightly across the folds.

3 On obtaining spirit power and the process of enskilment in the Salish world

taqʷsəblu told interviewer Bob Keller that, “It is part of the spirituality of our people that the isolated areas, places uncontaminated by other humans, are where you found the strongest spiritual help” (Heller 1996). This includes high mountain slopes of the North Cascades, in the Skagit River territory where Vi was born. “The mountain goat, for example, could give you some very strong spiritual help” (as quoted in Heller 1996). It is my understanding that

³ But see, especially, the efforts of Zalmi ‘Zeke’ Zahir (?əswili), and those of the Tulalip Tribe’s language teachers and programmers.

⁴ Bruce Ruddell, Composer, Gerard Schwartz, conducting the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, “The Healing Heart of the First People of this Land” Symphony, 2006.

⁵ Ron Hilbert (čadəsəjəb), Seattle-based artist and illustrator (1953-2006).

mountain goat power is one of the many spirit powers that a Coast Salish person might obtain during the seclusion of a spirit quest. These powers are occasionally, but not always, bestowed upon Salish young people, during quests held after proper lengthy ritual purification and instruction. Sometimes, these powers are so insistent, they will make themselves known, whether their recipient wishes to seek them out, or not. Their acquisition entails the respectful handling of responsibilities associated with that spirit power, including the mindful treatment of the plant, animal, or weather entity from whom the power was obtained. This respectful treatment in some cases includes a prohibition on eating of the plant or animal from whom the spirit power was obtained, and, in other cases, an ability to hunt or find a particular plant or animal with ease, and no restriction on consumption. According to what I have been told by those who engage with them, the acquisition of a spirit power, involves an ongoing mutual relationship between the power, and the one who receives the power. It is expected that a young person receiving such a power will continue to learn about it from careful observation of its earthly counterparts or in tangible and lasting manifestations of the power, such as lightning-cracked rock. See Amoss (1978), Collins (1974), Miller (1999), Thom (n.d.) for further descriptions of proper relationships with plants and animals and elemental forces engaged as Coast Salish spirit helpers. Mountain goat power is one of the many spirit powers that the chosen Coast Salish person might obtain during the seclusion of a spirit quest, but is a particularly strong one.

In addition to imparting knowledge to young trainees in times of seclusion, learned senior instructors can direct a young person to the careful observation of the behaviour of the earthly cognates associated with the spirit power, and the continued value of this mindful attention to those other, non-human sentient beings in the Lushootseed World. This attention can include long contemplation of the movements of a given animal, its social relations with members of its family over time, its specific, special abilities as a hunter or as watchful prey, and the reflection on how this animal (or plant, or weather entity) is recounted through Story and through associated songs.

The Upper Stó:lō Salish of Cheam First Nation's territory includes Mount Cheam, the site of one such important Story, of a man who went looking for mountain goats. Cheam Mountain's sheer cliff top on the Fraser River's south bank has a clear view west and east along the Fraser River Valley, north to Harrison Lake, and of Mount Baker, Vi's home mountain, to the south. And so, particular people are able to climb up the mountains, and gather the shed wool from the mountain goats, caught in branches, and while they do so, contemplate the high places, and develop, in the Ingoldian sense, a viewshed from trail.

As the Story was told by Maggie Emery and Amelia Douglas to the Coqualeetza Elders Group, the man in the narrative followed the tracks of a mountain goat, only to find two young women, really goats, out of their mountain goat skins, whom he followed to a place deep inside Cheam mountain, where he stayed many years, and married and had two mountain

goat children before returning to his own parents with an immense store of meat. The people of Cheam today are said to be the descendants of the man, his wife and two children. So, the Stó:lō mountain goats are also kin to Lushootseed neighbours.

In the Lushootseed case, there are Stories associated with the actions of Mountain Goat and certain humans affected by the Great Flood at the village of Swinomish, at the mouth of the Skagit River, in Lushootseed Territory. As the Story was told to Leon Metcalfe in 1975 by Dora Solomon, who was Skagit and Lummi, after the Great Flood, a boy wades out into the receding flood waters, and following directions he has heard, a blanket is touched to the waters, and so Mountain Goat comes down to the salt water (from a mountain so tall “she broke off”, “this then would be clothing for the people, their blankets. From the Mountain Goat!” (Hilbert 2004:2).

A number of details from the Cheam story of mountain goat people, including the development of nosebleeds on descending from the mountain to the moist plain below, the cave inside Cheam, to the difficulty mountain goats would have thriving in a lowland village, as well as the possibility of being lured somewhere in pursuit of a mountain goat, are all available resources to the mind of a young person searching in high remote places for their spirit power. The material wealth and sustenance of the mountain goat— its much prized wool both traded and made locally into blankets, collected at heights from brush, horn for spoons, and delicious meat allow an avenue for the enterprising climber to participate in the social world as a valued contributor to kin and community, and further afield.

The practical knowledge of mountain routes and also, of impasses, and of perseverance would be evident to those who are aware of where the initiate has quietly been taken to quest. The spirit power’s earthly counterpart can provide opportunities for instruction, further reflection and reminders of social relationships throughout a lifetime, such that a full explanation of the potentialities of such power can no more be iterated than can, say, a full explanation of the whole character and potential of another human being. Spirit powers are said to be complex and rich social resources to draw upon for strength and ability, if treated correctly, throughout the lives of their respective human interlocutors. I understand they can also be less than predictable, if not treated with the respect that is their due. Learning the ways of one’s spirit power through the careful observation of its earthly counterparts, and its effects on the mind and visions of the recipient, is the “education of attention” that Tim Ingold has termed *enskilment*⁶:

To observe is actively to attend to the movements of others; to

⁶ See also, Ingold (2000) for a helpful discussion which can be used to emphasize the *enskilment* of the ecographer, and others: “If a Koyukon hunter notices significant features in the landscape of which the Western observer remains unaware, it is not because their source lies “in the Koyukon mind” ...but...because the hunter is attuned to picking up information... That information is not in the mind but in the world.” (2000: 55).

imitate is to align that attention to the movement of one's own practical orientation towards the environment. Together they lead to the kind of rhythmic adjustment or resonance in the relation between the hunter and his surroundings that is the hallmark of skilled practice. As I have argued elsewhere (Ingold 1991:371, 1993:463), the fine-tuning of perception and action that is going on here is better understood as a process of *enskilment* than as one of *enculturation* (see also Pálsson 1994). For what is involved is not a transmission of representations, as the enculturation model implies, but an *education of attention*.

The characteristics of a person's spirit power might be revealed to other humans obliquely through the quality of song, or through characteristic dance movements, or in part by knowledge of the location in which it was sought. Sometimes, when a person knows what the spirit power of another person is, they might find a way to quietly tell certain others. A person with such power would invite envy and the attendant repercussions if they were to reveal the nature of that power, and would be seen as jeopardizing their relationship not just with fellow humans, but with their spirit power, itself. That said, some Lushootseed people are most observant of the dances of others, and of others' ability to bring home particular kinds of game when most hunters around them are unlucky, or the particular knowledge of habitat of a plant or animal a recipient of a given spirit might have. Thus, the types of power—whether from thunder, beaver, insect, rock or plant—potentially from any who are beings in the Lushootseed world, can be endlessly guessed at and quietly considered by the observers who were not privy to the more intimate working together of a particular person and their spirit power.

This is why I can only tell you what others have said, whether in a whisper, or even in print (Chamberlain 1993): Vi had mountain goat power. This is something I could not have ever properly asked her to confirm, even in the most oblique or subtle way. It is reasonable that a highly observant person, such as Vi, would be able to tell me a lot about mountain goats, whether she had such a power, or merely noticed “significant features” of which the “Western observer remains aware” (after Ingold 2000: 55, in footnote).

What was it about Vi that evidenced her mountain goat power? She was not a hunter, and while her father had a gift for moving through high mountain trails all the way to eastern Washington, she herself denied receiving that gift of trail navigation that might provide a hint of her powers. Instead, she was able, like the one who touched the robe to the floodwaters, to attract others to her.

Mountain goat power includes the ability to attract “wealth,” (in Lushootseed, *?iʔab*). *?iʔab*, meaning wealth, is a verblike stem, that can be made nounlike by use of the nominalizing prefix, *s*, thus “*siʔab*” denotes a wealthy person ((m.), *tsi siʔab* (f.)) (Bates et al. 1984). In the saltwater Lushootseed tradition, a wealthy person would count as aspects of wealth:

The ability to obtain and distribute foods and other goods to others, having knowledge, especially family-owned esoteric knowledge (Suttles 1987); wisdom; a large family; the ability to call on family members and associates for support in “giveaways,” and finally, the ability to call on others to assist in the giving of a memorial party or other longhouse celebration; it could also include monetary wealth, which provides additional means by which goods can be redistributed to others. Someone who is *siʔab* is someone who is respected as being of noble birth and action. That said, anyone might be termed *siʔab*, if their interlocutor wishes to remind them of their potential for greatness (or draw attention to a glaring and immediate failing. A *siʔab* person, one with wealth, is also restrained in their taking in of any sustenance, manifestly appreciative of the excellence of the gift of any fine thing, or foodstuff, expounding on its magnificence and near-irresistibility, while demonstrably, simultaneously able to resist its lure, only partaking of a small portion. The *siʔab* are, I think even more importantly, deeply appreciative of what persons, whether human, ancestral or other spirit, or earthly being, are able to demonstrate as thoughtful behaviour to others. This is acknowledged in their “lifting up” of human others, by speaking well of them publicly, noting what industry or kind acts they have observed in these others. The *siʔab* person also engages sociable acts with the ancestors, whether offering them food “sent up” in a fire, or as the late Skokomish longhouse leader Bruce subiyay Miller wrote, engaging in the restrained initial silence of greeting of *siʔab* individuals, which allows “the ancestors to visit” each other (1999:25) before the humans begin to speak.

So, a *siʔab* person is expected to be wealthy in their spirit power association as well, as it is founded on respectful attentive relations, carried out with the greatest restraint of personal appetites. They keep good company, and Mountain Goat, as we can observe, is well esteemed as a guide. From the preceding, the ways that this power could manifest and unfold does not allow for its complete listing, it is ever emergent and dialogically engaged with the human companion. But, some external evidence for mountain goat power may be discerned, which fits with the commonplace characterizations of this power: Wealth is attracted to the person with mountain goat power. No one can take what belongs to Mountain Goat—Mountain Goat must give it away; Mountain Goat’s perspective is far-seeing. In what was to be her second-to-last year on earth, Vi told me that Mountain Goat never puts a foot wrong, is cautious of having a firm foothold before moving on.

4 Sharing Wealth

What is most impressive is her way of attracting personnel and monetary resources to do what needs to be done. What ‘needs to be done’ had been a singular, driving force since Vi’s children were grown. As a professional storyteller, she had been invited to major conventions around the English-speaking world, to tell stories in Lushootseed and English. She requested a substantial sum where the events’ hosts could afford it (sometimes

over a thousand dollars per session, plus expenses), always directing the funds she raised from storytelling to Lushootseed Research, her non-profit corporation, set up for the teaching, appreciation and preservation of the Lushootseed language. Even here, in the publishing house and archive that is Lushootseed Research, the ‘wealth’ is created through distribution. Her books, usually sold in shops, were given away by the boxload, as at the one-year memorial party for her son, and at other communal events, and others followed her good example in giving away copies of books and DVDs that they were responsible for. She employed the Salish pattern of redistribution that constitutes wealth. Her archive of tape recordings and typescripts and home videos has been distributed to relatives and to the scholars and elders and who have participated in Lushootseed Research, such that members of the Skagit tribe, and other Lushootseed speakers, may have ready access in their own homes to materials that might otherwise only be reached through university archives, while I, and many friends and colleagues, have been gifted with shelves of precious materials, to further distribute by way of classroom lectures, and also through the dissemination of our own printed and conference reflections on the Lushootseed world. Let us call this ‘the distributive archive’ and consider it in another paper, another time. I bring out this point now, to show that Vi, figured as the ecographer, was able to apply this most Lushootseed way of being in the world through the reinforcement and regeneration of social relationships inherent in giving, to institutions such as a more standard archive, which can often seem inaccessible, despite the labours of our academic colleagues to open them up to the world through digital and other means. The mountain goat, it seems, has walked with seeming ease across a path that many of us slip down, despite our best efforts.

taqʷsəblu also fits that conception of the ecographer that Young-Leslie (2007) has shaped, with respect to the ecographer’s ability to inscribe the landscape. Vi has written on many, and quite literally, as with her assistance to artists in writing Lushootseed language on the particular places that Salish language speakers and their descendants hold as part of their homeland, and to remind others of their enduring presence. In Edgar Heap of Birds’ permanent installation, *Day for Night*, a pre-existing bust of Chief Seattle which was designed as a watering trough for horses on what had started as Seattle’s original Skid Road (in the both senses of the word), is reclaimed in his two flanking porcelain enamel-on-steel placards, a reminder and a comfort to those ignored, or worse, kicked off nearby park benches. taqʷsəblu provided the Lushootseed translations of Heap of Birds’ remonstrations and remembrances:

Lushootseed, right panel:

“dəgʷi gʷəl liiiiləx” dʷiisəd cəlul’ul’ cəl ti gʷaalapu”

English, reverse of right panel:

“Far away, brothers and sisters, we still remember you”

See also, the Seattle George monument, by Buster Simpson, at the Washington State Trade and Convention Centre in Seattle, where Vi’s Lushootseed text is sandblasted into the concrete pavement of the outdoor plaza.

5 Sacred Change for Each Other

Let me now leap to a more recent instance of mountain goat power, with respect to the remarkable mountain goat robe. Michael CHiXapkaid Pavel spent twelve summers collecting the wool shed onto brush near Cascade mountain peaks. It took a number of trips over the course of those twelve summers to accumulate the fifteen lbs. of wool, after carding, that would go into the blanket named du'kWXaXa'ʔt3w3l (Sacred Change for Each Other.) Susan sa'hLa mitSa Pavel spun and wove this elegant garment, so thick that many it was presented to in ceremony at Evergreen State College, including Vi, could only wear it while seated (*c.f.* Mapes 2007).

After being distributed through wearing and attendant ceremony, the robe attracted a generous benefactor, who purchased it to hang as a centerpiece, on its own wall in the Seattle Art Museum, where it is now installed (*c.f.* Bierwert 2008: 242). Vi told me that she went to the celebration for the installation, and that for the occasion, she wore a pounded cedarbark cape with mountain goat wool at the neck, that she had recently commissioned. At this, the social event of the season, hosted by Mimi Gates, those draped in diamonds and pearls were upstaged by the wearer of mountain goat power. “Andie,” she said, laughing (5/9/07), and leaping across yet another fold, “I’m a living, walking artifact!”

taqʷšəblu transformed my own understanding of proper relations between beings, and of proper relations that we must continue to develop and change for such institutions as schools, archives and museums to function in ways that can serve us all. Her ways of enacting Lushootseed notions of wealth leave all of us the richer.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Susan sa'hLa mitSa Pavel for her ready agreement to permit the use of photographs of her presentation to Coast Salish Elders of the woven blanket, "Sacred Change For Each Other," and Micheal CHiXapkaid Pavel for his continuation of the traditions upheld in the longhouse of his dear late uncle subiyay (Bruce Miller). Thanks are also owed to Mark Ebert for his provision of helpful commentary and technical support, to Heather Young-Leslie, for her evolving formulation of the ecographer concept, and for helpful comments on this draft. And finally to the late Vi taq'šəblu Hibert, as always, uʔdahadəbš čəxʷ, tsiʔ siʔab.

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