

Mrs. Nyman and Monsieur Proust: An Experiment in Comparative Literature

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*L Jáakk' ka Yeilt'ooch' Tláa has du jeeyís. For L Jáakk' and Yeilt'ooch' Tláa.*¹

EVERY POINT IS THE CENTER of some circumference. For readers of this journal, Marcel Proust will be the center of many concentric and overlapping circles. There is the world of his novel, so absolutely drowned in the narrator's consciousness. There is fin-de-siècle Paris, of which Proust is generally esteemed the supreme artist. There is French literature, of which he is a pinnacle, and the canon of modernism, for which he is a touchstone. And there is the Great Hall of the Novel, where Proust, like a delicate, neurasthenic incarnation of Grendel, wrecks all the mead benches, breaking open the genre, enlarging the possibilities of length, subject, and spirit, and so opening a portal for the angels and demons of twentieth-century literature.

Most readers of this journal, on the other hand, will not know the name Elizabeth Nyman—much less her truer name, Sèdayà (Seidayaa)—but she too is the center of many worlds.² She lived from 1915 to 1999; by the arbitrary and linear measurement of Gregorian time she was a generation or two younger than Proust, though by some other measure she may be his contemporary, or indeed much older. Matriarch of the Yanyèdí (Yanyeidí) Clan of the Tlingit people, mother of eleven children, renowned storyteller and tradition-bearer in a tiny town in what is now western Canada, she was an orphan who rose to become a figure of high honor in a society where kinship is all.

From an early age, she was esteemed for her exquisite sense of language. A Jewish fur merchant from Juneau named Charlie Goldstein spoke Tlingit and found young Elizabeth so

elegant a speaker that he would request of her father that she stay with him all day while he was buying furs. Decades later Nyman remembered him saying to her father Tom Williams:

Tlaxh x'êghà áwé axh tûghà yú xh'ayatánk
Lingít xh'ênáxh.
A tûx' xh'ashak'wkalighî,
A tûx' áwé tle yan wât yáxh áwé yú xh'atangi nich, á áwé axh tuwâ sigû.³

[141]

I really like the way she speaks Tlingit.
For one thing, she has such a cute way of talking,
And for another, she speaks like an adult;
That's what I like [about her].

The sweetness of the remembered language enacts the skill. What is translated here as “a cute way of talking” is the beautiful and nuanced *xh'ashak'wkalighî*—this verb means something like “she speaks in a lovely way,” or more literally still, “she is little and lovely through the mouth” (the verb for *being lovely* with *xh'ê/xh'a*, mouth, incorporated at the front, and with the *shak'w* morpheme in the middle of the verb incorporating a diminutive). She is little and lovely through the mouth, and yet at the same time she speaks like a “yan wât,” a word that can mean adult or even elder.

A girl who speaks in a darling way, and yet with exceptional gravity, beyond her years. We can imagine that the compliment becomes flipped for the older Mrs. Nyman, telling these stories: an elder of renown and great knowledge who still conveys a disarming, childlike frankness, not to mention an expressiveness manifest in her elaborate hand gestures, which can be seen in photographs throughout the book of stories that bears as its title one of her Tlingit names, *Gagiwdul.ât*, meaning “Brought Forth to Reconfirm.”

Let me now trace explicitly the lineaments of this essay: Marcel Proust and Elizabeth Nyman, two verbal artists from completely different worlds, never having heard of each other,

having no connections so far as I know— but each a pinnacle of style in his or her respective language; each a lifelong student of memory; each possessed of a sensibility at once young and primordially old; each attempting to split open the ancient earth at the fault line between anecdote and myth. What resonant frequency might they sound in ambling down the page together? Both share a conviction that the path is a crucial narrative model, and both are particularly preoccupied by barriers that prove illusory. The two opposing paths at Combray in fact form a ring around the town; the glacier blocking two peoples on the Taku River melts away after an appropriate sacrifice.

The motivation for this pairing is, perhaps, merely autobiographical on my part (though both Proust and Nyman teach that there is nothing *mere* about that particular arena). Namely, I have long been a student of French literature, and especially a reader of Proust. I have more recently become a student of Tlingit language and oral tradition, and an awed reader (sometimes listener) of Elizabeth Nyman.

First undertaken by me at age twenty, and reenacted many times after, the reading of Proust has been an essential model for my experience of the world. Every sensation becomes intensified, ecstatic, and yet also estranged by that [142] certain queer archness, right on the knife-edge of life and at the same time seeming as if to watch it from an interplanetary distance. I can recall a brief dip into *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* in the winter of 2018 which unleashed twenty-four hours of heightened perception: the fine droplets of water in the morning fog, the play of light and conversation at dinner, above all the extra-terrestrial and masochistic experience of going to the dentist the next morning, where I catalogued a dozen declensions of pain and pressure before I was forced to disgorge baroque swirls of blood into the sink.

My sense—tentative as an outsider’s like mine must be—is that certain analogous intensities characterize the phenomenology of Tlingit story. Their sources are different, of course: encounters with animals in the forest; the heightened, sacred oratory of the potlatch feast; and the extreme warmth, bordering on ecstasy, of affirming a kinship tie and bestowing a gift (as we’ll see Mrs. Nyman do with her student, recorder, and editor, the linguist Jeff Leer). It is Proust who first taught me to be on the lookout for these intensities, usually found where the language of myth and the language of the everyday ricochet off each other, and where a lineage bursts into the fullness of the present with the suddenness and unbidden grace of the gift. The presence of these concerns in Proust has (at least in part) made it possible for me to recognize their familiars in other traditions. The reading of Mrs. Nyman, meanwhile, has been teaching me to see these epiphanies not merely as effects of language, but as foundational elements of aliveness, facts of the animate world.

The stakes of comparative literature in a colonial age

The project of a *Weltliteratur*, a world literature, in this vein—comparing two traditions on purely thematic grounds, or, even more nakedly, by virtue of having encountered both of them in one’s own reading life—is considered in some circles to be politically suspect. The argument against such a project usually runs as follows: the texts are inevitably measured by European standards and assimilated to European genres (or, more nakedly still, appropriated by European people). The very idea of literature is seen, in the most perspicacious of these critiques, as stripping non-Western narratives of their Indigenous political and spiritual power, instead making them into neutral objects of secular history or impotent sources of aesthetic pleasure. In this account, literature is an irredeemably European idea, and its application to non-European forms of verbal discourse serves as an exercise in dismemberment and alienation. Suraj Ahmed,

for instance, has argued that the origin of the modern humanistic method is to be found in the efforts of British colonialists like William Jones (at once pioneering comparatist and imperial jurist) to strip [143] South Asian languages from their ritualized and religious relationship to the material world, and make them over instead into a sterile form of historicized discourse more easily bent to colonial subjugation.⁴

The warning is well taken. But our response should not be to retreat into the self-satisfied impotence of mere critique—the go-to move in scholarship now, one that has nearly brought the hermeneutic project to a state of irreversible irrelevance. Rather, we must widen the circumference of our categories in a way that responds both to the traditions nearer to us, and to those farther. We should acknowledge that such is the path we must take through the world—from what we know, to what we don't—and not run from it just because some of the most sorrowful chapters in history happen to lie along the way.

In more prosaic terms, it is my hope that this essay will not merely be a project of reading Elizabeth Nyman as literature with the help of Marcel Proust (though, as I hope to show, there are great benefits after all to doing so). This essay also aspires to be about what the Tlingit categories of *shkalneek* (story) and *tlaagú* (forever story, myth) can teach us about Proust and the novel—a literary form so often thought to be (merely) human, (merely) social, (merely) secular. That is, I mean to see if, by reading a Tlingit storyteller alongside a French novelist, we can consider a state of being beyond the normal parameters of literature to which they both lay claim, a form of heightened experience that language can recollect and induce, but which is itself beyond the purview of language, in the realm of sensation and particularly in the intensification of encounter by the proximity of memory, both individual and collective.

Two facts make Mrs. Nyman, as she was often called, a powerful guide in this endeavor. The first, and most important, is that her published work consists of a book that she carefully oversaw, selecting the texts and determining the title: *Gagiwdul.àt: Brought Forth to Reconfirm: The Legacy of a Taku River Tlingit Clan*. The stories were told to, transcribed, and edited by her longtime collaborator, the linguist Jeff Leer. Thus, her texts come down to us in a form that she was careful to authorize. Unfortunately, such attention to the desires of the teller was, until recently, uncommon in the realm of oral literature; often storytellers were not consulted about how their stories ended up in print.

The second fact is that the Tlingit verbal tradition has had a rich community of scholars, both Tlingit and non-Tlingit, thinking about how to present it to the world, and how to build bridges between it and the world's other great storytelling cultures. Foremost among these scholars were the husband-and-wife team Ʒeixwnéi Nora Marks Dauenhauer and XwaayeenáƷ Richard Dauenhauer. Nora was a Tlingit woman raised in a traditional home, a fluent [144] speaker of the language, one of the first Tlingit people to get a degree in anthropology. Richard was a white man with a PhD in comparative literature who fell in love with a Tlingit woman and also her culture. Across a prodigious series of books and essays they built a vocabulary for conveying Tlingit animism, aesthetic values, and theories of intellectual property within the constraints of the English language. They did so in constant consultation with elders, and they did much to prepare a patch of common ground upon which it would be possible to make a real comparison between Western and Indigenous American intellectual systems. In their own great volume of Tlingit stories, the Dauenhauers write that the Tlingit oral tradition is “for those who wish to know who they are (whoever they are), and who the Tlingit people are” (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer x). Student of the Dauenhauers that I am, I submit the same holds true for reading

Elizabeth Nyman alongside Marcel Proust. It is my hope that this essay will be worthy at least *to begin* such an endeavor.

To know who you are in the Dauenhauers' sense is hard work, and sometimes even dangerous work. I approach it with humility, and with a clear-eyed sense that I may make errors—for which I take full responsibility—and with the knowledge that my interpretations may not always accord with those of others, either within or beyond the Tlingit community. It is easy to make mistakes that can be harmful, that can open old wounds, that can explode unexcavated landmines. But the greater danger, the worse outcome, is to believe, as many seem to now, that there can be no reconciliation, no genuine communication, between European culture and Indigenous culture. This belief is not merely defeatist; it is a delusion. It is not possible for us to return to a world before 1492. All of us live on the bridges built since then—built poorly, precariously, and with blood. We must find a way to make a home on their spans. Perhaps Mrs. Nyman and Monsieur Proust, these two masters of the word, can help us. Looked at in the right way, they give us some things held in common across radically different cultures whose encounters have been characterized, in the past, by disaster. They give us an encomium to lineage tempered by empathy for the outsider; an inheritance made up of epiphanies that lend animism to story; and a sense that gift exchange is what makes the blood circulate through the body of the sentient world.

“My grandmother was touching the sky”

“Elizabeth Nyman Tells Her Life Story” is the straightforward title of the central narrative in *Brought Forth to Reconfirm*. It is “Sèdayà Du Khustiyí Dàt Sh Káłnik” in Tlingit: “Sèdayà Her Life, About It She Speaks” (Sèdayà [Seidayaa] is the Tlingit name by which Elizabeth Nyman was best known). She [145] begins by explaining briefly who her parents were, and what clans

they came from. Then she explains that something was wrong with her mother when she was pregnant. “So I was born when I was seven months old;/ I was premature./ Then/ when I was one month old my mother died” (Nyman 101). A council is called to deliberate on the fate of the baby:

For lack of anything else to do, my future father-in-law, *Yaxhgûs*’ (Billie Williams) said,
“Let her be smothered under her mother’s breast and buried with her mother.”
Then my true grandmother (*Khinxh.ashi*, Anna) spoke up,
“It will not be so.
Whenever she begins to starve on me
I will chew up something for her to eat.”
“Can you raise her on that?
She’ll die of hardship,” [said Billie Williams.]
The others did not say a word;
It was *Yaxhgûs*’ alone who was speaking.
“That’s all right; I don’t care;
If she starves on me, then she’ll starve,” she said.
So they conceded to her, and she saved me.
So she adopted me; whoever had children she would pay
to nurse me for a day [at a time], they say.
People who perhaps had a lot of children,
she would pay one or another of them.
I wonder how my grandmother figured out how to do all that.
She would boil rice
Until it was just liquid
and pour it through cheesecloth.
After she had carefully, very carefully,
gotten out the rice husks
she would spoon in some oil and boil it with it.
Then too
the type of milk called condensed milk—
it tastes really sweet, like sugar—
she would spoon in a little bit of that
and stir it in.
My mother had little spoon, so big,
with a twisted handle;
this is what she would feed me with
when the families with children had gone to the trapping grounds. (Nyman 101–3)

Seidayaa owes her life to her grandmother; her life is given not only by her parents, but by an ancestor who then becomes her new mother. When she says “true grandmother” she does not

mean this in the English sense (her mother's mother or father's mother), but rather an elder of her clan—the Yanyèdí [146] (Yanyeidí)—who has elected to save her life.⁵ Where biology fails, ingenuity and culture intervene. Khinxh.ashì (Kinx ashee) cannot breastfeed, but with her social connections, her cleverness, and her sheer desperation, she keeps the baby alive. “Ha wâ sákwhêgé tlaxh yê a dà yan tuwditán axh fík'w,” marvels Seidayaa: *my, just how could she think all this through, my grandmother*. Eventually a baby bottle is brought back from the town of Whitehorse, and it becomes easier to feed the tiny child. “‘Here's how you do this, like this; here's the measuring cup,’ they told my grandmother./ She must have been overjoyed” (Nyman 103).

Tlingit society is matrilineal; status is inherited from the mother's clan. Still, as this story indicates, men traditionally held much authority, and could determine the fate of a child. So it is something special that Elizabeth Nyman is given life by being taken up so directly into a female lineage, one that is not only biological (though it is that too); it is also a heritage of culture, temperament, and obligation, something that in Tlingit is best expressed by the word *kustí*, which means life, existence, way of being. Seidayaa's earliest days are shaped by an act of enormous charity and selflessness, from someone who stands closer to the past, who represents the headwaters of the clan. The love-bond that results is unmistakable: “Finally/ I was now able to speak and/ my grandmother rejoiced.” The Tlingit for that last line is “wé axh fík'w ch'u tle de yú xâts'i kè ushich”: literally, *my grandmother was touching the sky* (Nyman 104–5).

But the idyll is lost almost as soon as it is won: “when I was four, they say, my grandmother died./ This is as much as I know of her, nothing more” (Nyman 105).

A life saved, a life lost, nourishment given, language given, a potent will to ensure the survival of another, and joy in the transmission of words—all of this is buried in the grave of

early childhood, reconstructed from some admixture of faint memory, the tremors of an unremembered trauma, and the recollections of others. *My grandmother died when I was four, they say—yú.á*, in Tlingit. This *they say—yú.á*—is a formula usually reserved for telling the most ancient stories, ones that are transmitted across generations; here it is transposed to the deepest stratum of autobiography.

The differences of context and tone between this world and that of Proust's novel—to say nothing of Proust's person—are obvious. And yet there are real resonances. A sickly child, cared for by a lineage of women—the mother, Tante Léonie, Françoise with her habits annealed in the residual glow of an ancient France, and above all, the grandmother, so solicitous, so imbued with wit and spirit and language, so concerned for the health of her slight grandson, and [147] whose death will become a defining sorrow in the narrator's life. One of the first things we hear her say is to the narrator's father, in dismay at her grandson's overly sheltered life: “‘That is not the way to make him strong and active,’ she would say sadly, ‘especially this little man, who needs all the strength and will-power that he can get.’”⁶ Bathilde is a figure of high culture and the *salon*; her heroes are Mmes de Staël and de Sévigné; but hers is not an indoor world at all. In fact, she is suffocated by the parlor, and so is always running out into the fresh air. Even in the midst of a terrific summer storm,

my Grandmother [...] was to be seen pacing the deserted rain-lashed garden, pushing back her disordered grey locks so that her forehead might be freer to absorb the health-giving draughts of wind and rain. She would say, “At last one can breathe!” and would trot up and down the sodden paths—too straight and symmetrical for her liking, owing to the want of any feeling of nature in the new gardener, whom my father had been asking all morning if the weather was going to improve—her keen, jerky little step regulated by the various effects wrought upon her soul by the intoxication of the storm, the power of hygiene, the stupidity of my upbringing and the symmetry of gardens, rather than by any anxiety (for that was quite unknown to her) to save her plum-colored skirt from the mudstains beneath which it would gradually disappear to a height that was the constant bane and despair of her maid. (1:11–12)⁷

The grandmother brings into this novel something quite often thought to be far outside its swaddled, fin-de-siècle purview: the wild. Granted, this is just the garden at Combray; granted, this is just a brief stroll on a rainy summer evening. And yet, “the intoxication of the storm, the power of hygiene, the stupidity of my upbringing and the symmetry of gardens”—these are genuine markers of the wild, a turning away from the orderly garden and stifling habits to face the unpredictable in nature. In these opening passages of the novel the wild is thrown into stark relief by the contrast between the grandmother’s pagan delight in the fresh air and the father’s perpetual worrying over the barometer: on the one hand, nature breathed in through a hail of raindrops; on the other, nature gazed at through a tube of mercury. In throwing herself into the vigor of the storm, the grandmother embodies the joy of survival itself. And if this seems a grandiose claim for a character otherwise given to trading *bons mots* with a marquise, let it be remembered that her death becomes the crucible in which the narrator’s devastation at the loss of the past transforms into a calling to make art for the future.

Myth and the wild

My point here is not to say that Proust’s novel is more wild than it is cultured, but rather that *it is both*. In this vast novel the wild and the cultured are, contrary to the clichés inherited from certain strains of European Romanticism, [148] *one and the same*.⁸ *À la recherche du temps perdu* partakes of an overwhelming immersion in nature—the ecstasies of hawthorn bushes, sunsets, motes of dust, brazen metaphors like that of Charlus as a reindeer digesting the lichen of high society gossip so that writers can consume it in the form of his excrement—and this nature *is* the novel’s central reservoir of culture. The forest and the field, the vegetal and the animal, these are repositories for an immense linguistic energy. It is discharged by the striking of the imagination against the organic world like a hammer on an anvil. As a necessary correlate, the

great manmade objects—cathedrals, Venice—are frequently described as wonders of nature.⁹

And though the narrator himself is often so paralyzed by his illness that he cannot bring himself to go outside, this only stokes his sense that spirit and language seem to dwell in the vastness that he peeks at longingly through venetian blinds or a train window.

It is perhaps because of this continuity between nature and culture that the mythical register is so strong in Proust; for myth is nature expressed as culture. “A myth is a theorem about the nature of reality, expressed not in algebraic symbols or inanimate abstractions but in animate narrative form,” writes Robert Bringhurst.¹⁰ Consider, alongside this definition, the magnificent description of asparagus in “Combray”:

but what most enraptured me were the asparagus, tinged with ultramarine and pink which shaded off from their heads, finely stippled in mauve and azure, through a series of imperceptible gradations to their white feet—still stained a little by the soil of their garden-bed— with an iridescence that was not of this world. I felt that these celestial hues indicated the presence of exquisite creatures who had been pleased to assume vegetable form and who, through the disguise of their firm, comestible flesh, allowed me to discern in this radiance of earliest dawn, these hinted rainbows, these blue evening shades, that precious quality which I should recognize again when, all night long after a dinner at which I had partaken of them, they played (lyrical and coarse in their jesting as the fairies in Shakespeare’s *Dream*) at transforming my chamber pot into a vase of aromatic perfume. (1:131)¹¹

A biological process is translated into the animate language of faerie, and thus participates at once in a story tradition and in the immediate facts of the body. By way of myth, the imagination makes its way into the kidneys and bladder and urethra, and comes out the other end perfumed. In myth the imagination, the body, and the world come together as a unity. As Northrop Frye writes, “The world of mythical imagery [...] is a world of total metaphor, in which everything is potentially identical with everything else, as though it were all inside a single infinite body.”¹²

The first story in Mrs. Nyman’s collection is also about the world as the inside of the body. But while in Proust the world shrinks into the organs of the [149] body, in Nyman the

body swells and then explodes across the world. “The Battle of the Giants” was recounted by her in December of 1988. Two giants, Was’as’ê (Was’as’êi) and Łkùdasêts’k (Lkoodasêits’k), stand on opposite sides of the Taku River. For a long time “they had gotten along well together,” but suddenly they come to a disagreement and start to fight (Nyman 3). Each claims the Taku for himself. Eventually Was’as’êi rips the body of Lkoodasêits’k to shreds. The defeated giant’s body parts are scattered across the landscape and become its monuments—animate body-parts that serve as the aetiology of physical nature. A hill becomes *Lkudatsêts’k Shàyì* (*Lkoodatsêits’k Shaayi*), the head of the vanquished Lkoodasêits’k, and his heart becomes a cordiform island in the center of the Taku River: the Heart of the Taku. His windpipe, meanwhile, is yanked out and turned into a waterfall that gushes uncannily from solid rock: “we don’t drink even a cup of it, it is so cold, that water” (Nyman 5).

A literary critic might reflexively object that there is a categorical difference between the mythologies of Proust and Nyman. The critic might say Nyman is actually *telling myth*, while Proust is deploying myth within the context of something else altogether, a different genre, a different relationship to truth: his myths are part of a novel self-consciously late within its own tradition, wrapped in irony and ambivalence and self-cancellation (the asparagus, we soon discover, are not magical faeries, but weapons that Françoise uses in her war against the kitchen maid, who suffers terrible asthma whenever the spears are cut and cooked). Students and scholars of Indigenous Studies, meanwhile, might object to the word “myth” being used here at all: they might hear echoes of its long history as a term of derision used by missionaries against Indigenous story, rather than as a term of high respect, which is what I intend.¹³

Both objections stem in part from the linear history of literature that many of us have been fed. We have been told that story began with myth in the time of Homer and Hesiod; then

history absorbed myth in the writings of the Hebrew scribes; then by a gradual evolution of genres—epic, chronicle, romance, lyric, and finally, fiction—a transvaluation of values was effected. The gods, who had been embodiments of the hard facts of the world, were reduced to mere metaphor, while openly fictional characters and situations became the hallmark of realism.¹⁴

There is charisma to this account, and perhaps even a limited truth. But it fails us completely when it comes to the study of story outside of the European sphere (and quite frankly limits what we are able to understand about European literature, too).¹⁵ Elizabeth Nyman is, according to this schema, relegated to [150] the time of Homer.¹⁶ But Mrs. Nyman was a person of the twentieth century, and more important still, her storytelling is no “naïve myth,” if such a thing even exists. Here is how she completes the episode of the giant’s windpipe:

Now I have been asking them about it— Harry Carlick says
he has walked across that small island
and inspected [the waterfall] carefully, he says.
It is nothing but rock;
it is solid rock, he says.
[It starts] from somewhere far below and is very thick, that rock.
Well, it could be you know, his [windpipe] (Nyman 5)

Mrs. Nyman, in other words, moves as easily from the mythical register to the empirical one as any modernist writer. Harry Carlick just visited the giant’s windpipe not too long ago and made a detailed inspection of this mysterious water source, surging up from pure rock. Far from being incredulous about story, oral literature tends to partake of a deep epistemological humility: *Well, it could be you know...* (incidentally, Nyman says this line in English within the original Tlingit, as if deploying her bilingual code-switching to make another change in diction from the mythical register).

Such formulas of humility in the face of the past are common in Tlingit storytelling, and in many oral traditions: we have already seen *yú.á*—they say, which can both evoke the authority of tradition, and also suggest that this knowledge, after all, comes down to us second- or third- or tenth-hand. Another common appendix to many phrases in Tlingit story is *gwál yé* and its many variations—meaning *maybe, perhaps, it might have been like that*. Even some of the key “oral formulas” in Tlingit storytelling—to borrow the terminology used by the scholar and poet K̄aagwáask’ Ishmael Hope in the spirit of the great scholars of oral literature Parry and Lord—are phrased as questions: *Wáa nanée sáwé* approximates “at some point,” but more literally translates to “How did it happen?” And *wáa ykunayáat’ sáwé* can mean “after a while,” but most literally translates to “How long was it [before...]?”¹⁷

“The Battle of the Giants” passes in and out of the mythical register, of the mythical mode of thought. After this little story about Harry Carlick, Seidayaa resumes her telling of the time of the giants, and we learn that Was’as’éi, upset by what has happened, settles down as a steep mountain elsewhere. “People that are truly self-confident/ will gain sustenance from my sides” (Nyman 7), the surviving giant says. Then immediately, the narrative shifts to an anecdote about Mrs. Nyman and her late husband, who traveled to the giant mountain [151] so that her husband could climb the steep sides to collect seagull eggs. The expedition is risky, and described with incredible precision—she tells her listeners that the sleeves of her husband’s shirt were knotted together so that the seagull eggs could be carried around his neck. And then she ends her story with a return to the spiritual dimension of the animate world, myth folded gently into everyday practice:

They used to speak to [the mountain],
“Don’t let anything bad happen to me, grandfather,” they would say to it.
And
that mountain could understand human speech too. (Nyman 7)

Proust must often explicitly flag dream, reverie, and involuntary recollection as the sites of myth in order to permit himself to use it, but as a structuring device, it similarly opens and closes worlds within his novel. For instance, myth saturates the opening of the *Recherche*, where divine transformations and expansions surge out of the narrator's body, "comme Ève naquit d'une côte d'Adam" (CS I:4)—as Eve was born from the rib of Adam.

Insiders and outsiders

Both Proust and Nyman share a concern for lineage. In Proust this concern is most explicit in his passion for the aristocracy. For Proust, nobility unites land and language, the present and the past, biological generation and cultural continuity. Aristocrats are embodiments of story and time; the very sound of a noble name rings like the coin of the past:

I knew that it was the residence of the Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes, I knew that they were real personages who did actually exist, but whenever I thought about them I pictured them either in tapestry, like the Comtesse de Guermantes in the "Coronation of Esther" which hung in our church or else in iridescent colors, like Gilbert the Bad in the stained-glass window where he changed from cabbage green, when I was dipping my fingers in the holy water stoup, to plum blue when I had reached our row of chairs, [...] in short, invariably wrapped in the mystery of the Merovingian age and bathed, as in a sunset, in the amber light which glowed from the resounding syllable "antes". (1:187)¹⁸

That the actual aristocrats the narrator gets to know continuously fail to live up to this mythology does not diminish his ecstatic feeling; rather, this disillusion plays an essential part in the back and forth between a higher spiritual register and the register of lived life, the one always slipping in and out of the other.

In Mrs. Nyman, the names that trace out the great Tlingit kinship system are likewise a source of transcendent joy. This is evident in the way she speaks with [152] Jeff Leer, her listener. Leer, not himself Indigenous, was adopted into the *Gaanax̄teidí* clan and given the name

Wèhá (Weihá), which had belonged before him to Jimmy Fox of Klukwan, a member of the *Gaanax̄.ádi* (a clan closely related to the *Gaanax̄teidi*) who was reputed in the 1960s to be 110 years old.¹⁹ Tlingit clans all belong to one of two larger social groups, or moieties, for purposes of exogamous marriage: the Ravens and Wolves (on the coast this latter moiety is called Eagle). Traditionally, Ravens can only marry Wolves, and vice versa. The *Gaanax̄.ádi* are a Raven clan and the system is matrilineal, so Jimmy Fox inherited his Raven clan from his mother. His father, meanwhile, in accordance with the system of marriage, was a Wolf. In fact, he was a member of the Yanyeidí clan, also Elizabeth Nyman's clan. In the parlance of Tlingit kinship, then, Weihá Jimmy Fox was the "child" of the Yanyeidí, a special and prized relationship, entailing obligations of care and reciprocal gifting. As Jeff Leer has inherited the name Weihá, so too (at least according to Mrs. Nyman) he has inherited Jimmy Fox's status as child of the Yanyeidí. A transmigration of kinship has taken place, carried across time on the shield of an ancient name. Elizabeth Nyman breaks her narrative of the Yanyeidí clan history to address Leer directly, and explain what kinship means:

All the Children of the *Yanyèdí*
are treasured.
No one will shove his fist in your face;
this is how people respected themselves long ago.
If someone were to talk down to you,
one would be offended by it.
This is how you are.
My uncle,
this is a valuable name,
Wèhá,
[that] he gave to you.
As [one of] the Children of the *Yanyèdí*
you are exalted;
your name is very valuable.
This is what I was telling that woman.
As the Queen
and King George are respected,

so no one will be able to say anything against you;
this is truly how it is with the Children of the *Yanyèdi*. (Nyman 21–23)

To be a child of the Yanyeidí—to be their opposites in the kinship system—is to be treated (literally) like royalty. To enter the kinship system collapses the distance between past and present, insider and outsider. Weihá is Weihá, and [153] so a white linguist comes to be wrapped in the great blanket of family which makes a human human in many Indigenous cosmologies.²⁰ Even the metaphor of the royal family constitutes a beautiful prolepsis: the Queen is presumably the reigning Elizabeth II (remember this is taking place in Canada), while King George is likely either George II or III, who sat on the throne when the British first arrived in the Pacific Northwest in the eighteenth century. Tlingit has a long memory, and Anglo-Canadians are still called *Ginjichwáan, King George People*. Thus, the regnal lineage of England and the many Children of the Yanyeidí stand side-by-side, all present at once, like on a Proustian tapestry, or like the many smaller faces that combine to form a single crest figure on a Tlingit house screen. As in the demesne of Guermantes, so too on the Taku, names and lineage matter because they make the generative facts of human life touch the land itself.

You are truly exalted,
[you and] all the Children of the *Yanyèdi*
[whose name comes] from the Taku River.
This is why I want you to see
Your background, your history,
what happened in the past.
[...]
If only you were taken by boat along the Taku River
you could write down the whole story in a book. (Nyman 23)

Yet neither Proust nor Nyman are blind followers of lineage. They both write with great sympathy for outsiders and a sharp awareness of the cruelty inherent in a hierarchy based on birth. They were each, in their way, outsiders themselves. Proust's circumstances—gay, part Jewish, a young bourgeois forever trying to penetrate the sanctum of the aristocracy—will be

well known to many readers of this journal. For Mrs. Nyman, the circumstances were still more painful. Being without a mother meant isolation, humiliation, and rejection. It led directly to a difficult marriage, an abusive father-in-law, accusations of impropriety, scandal and judgment, serious contemplation of suicide—all of which she describes in her stories with great candor.

The resulting moral is absolutely clear to her.

From the beginning
it has always been like this,
nephew,
for children whose mother or father are not alive.
People simply cannot take care of them the way they do their own.

[154]

So now, for my part,
whoever is an orphan,
or has something the matter and needs help,
I open up my heart to him;
It afflicts my heart.
I do my very best to help him out. (Nyman 127)²¹

Seidayaa is not an uncritical bearer of tradition; on the contrary, she sees that “from the beginning” the treatment of orphans has always been a problem in her world. She does not pass judgment, exactly, for she knows full well the difficulty of providing for others when the project of survival is all-consuming. But she signals that the heart must open to those who cannot be provided for, especially those who are not provided for according to the laws of custom.²²

Mrs. Nyman was an outsider who became an insider, or rather an insider by birth who went through a long and difficult period of social rejection and debasement. It was perhaps in part for this reason that she drew the attention of another outsider-insider, the Jewish fur merchant Charlie Goldstein, whose praise of the young Seidayaa opened this essay. In *Brought Forth to Reconfirm*, Charlie Goldstein is a figure of gentleness, generosity, and imagination. He gives the little Elizabeth scraps of fur and feeds her lunch when she sits with him. Mrs. Nyman

explains that Goldstein learned to speak Tlingit because he went to kindergarten with Tlingit children (maybe because— though this is just my speculation—as a Jew he was not welcome in the segregated white schools of Juneau). Charlie describes to the little Elizabeth how he used to make sleds from the discarded jawbones of slaughtered cows with his Native school friends. Many years later, reflecting on these vivid memories of another person prompts Mrs. Nyman to say:

So you see,
whatever
is told to me
I listen to. (Nyman 155)

To listen to the person you're supposed to listen to is one thing. To listen to someone who stands apart, who is not of your kind—this is yet another discipline of the mind, a way of enlarging the spirit and the range of story.

The most important Jew in the *Recherche*—yet another Charles—walks the world guided by a similar spirit, and hampered by similar constraints. Swann is welcome in all places—the little house at Combray as well as the Jockey Club and the Faubourg Saint-Germain—but everywhere he is somewhat dismissed, forced to walk on eggshells, taken for granted. The aunts at [155] Combray will not accept that he moves in aristocratic circles, despite all evidence to the contrary; the Duchesse de Guermantes will not accept his impending death, despite his confession and his pallor. But to really hear what Swann has to say—to touch his superb taste and knowledge of art, to say nothing of his bitter experience with jealousy and love—is to hear what the world drowns out with habit and prejudice: namely, a voice that has joined the chorus of a tradition by its own brilliance and will, rather than by default. Proust's narrator feels about Swann like Mrs. Nyman does about Goldstein: that this is a voice worth listening to because it is

a voice that speaks a language it has *chosen*. The difference is that the narrator arrives at this realization only in retrospect, when it is too late to listen as he should have:

and indeed in the case of Swann, whom I had known, I reproached myself for not having paid sufficient attention to him, for not having paid attention to him in a sufficiently disinterested spirit, for not having listened to him properly when he used to entertain me while we waited for his wife to come home for lunch and he showed me his treasures, now that I knew that he was to be classed with the most brilliant talkers of the past.
(3:202)²³

The gift to remember, the gift to tell

One of the difficulties, perhaps, in comparing Marcel Proust and Elizabeth Nyman is that the former is so deeply immersed in the European ideology of art, and the European ideology of the artist. These structures make grandiose claims for the individual, claims that Proust himself often affirmed. Many (though perhaps not all) such claims would be unfamiliar to a Tlingit tradition bearer. Certainly Elizabeth Nyman has a different sense of what she is doing: telling the story of the land and her people, and how her own life fits into that larger narrative. Which is not to say she's unconscious of her skill or the importance of her project: "When something is not right, I think about it/ and [the answer] just appears before my eyes" (Nyman 153). To be the bearer of stories is to have within you Inspiration: the capacity for thought to rise to the surface and become, like breath exhaled in the cold, visible to the eyes (the metaphor of inner sight is exactly the same in the original Tlingit as in English). Moreover, to have inspiration is to have a claim on the ethical, to know what is right.

In the realm of ethics there may in fact exist a deep structure, a philosophical underpinning, that unites Proust and Nyman, something older and more universal than the European ideology of art: the philosophy of the gift. By this I mean the "system of total services" described by Marcel Mauss in societies (like that of the Tlingit as well as the old warrior aristocracy of Europe) where the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate gifts is the central

engine of economic and social communion.²⁴ And by this I also mean the continuous and [156] self-enlarging circulation of things that Lewis Hyde distills down to one essential principle: “the gift must always move.”²⁵ A system of gifts is a property regime by which the movement of things confers value and prestige. Things cannot be hoarded or invested without succumbing to rot and decay. A system of gifts foregrounds that which comes unbidden: the gift cannot be asked for, but, as a matter of faith, it is waited upon. In Tlingit culture, gift-giving reaches its apogee in the *ku.éex*, the potlatch or party, a tradition still vibrantly alive, where one moiety feasts another and gives gifts to them, usually in commemoration of the dead. In exchange, the guests console their mourning hosts and confirm the hosting clan’s privileges, names, and heritage.²⁶ What happens in ritual form at the *ku.éex* is also the foundation of all continuity and connection within Tlingit society. In Mrs. Nyman’s case, the overriding power of the gift even in the face of conflict and adversity is most apparent in the remembrance of her father and father-in-law. These were men from opposing moieties; thus they represent the full range of kinship obligations. But they caused her much anxiety and grief. They had wanted to leave her for dead as an infant. But she arrives at a reconciliation— something beyond forgiveness even—after they have died. Their true gifts can finally be accepted through the resurrection of memory:

To this day I thank my father-in-law.
If it had not been for him,
I too would now be like those who live in my town. It is because of my father and my
father-in-law
that I am like a Tlingit;
and I am coming to realize it.
[I ponder] carefully how they used to talk to me,
and when I recall it
it’s just as if it were happening right before my eyes; that’s how it is.²⁷ (Nyman 151)

Gratitude toward the dead and remembrance of their gifts is the key to the upsurge of memory: the past appears right before Seidayaa’s eyes, and she can now describe what she sees in story.

The late Shangukeidí Clan Leader Kingeistí David Katzeek once said that the proper translation into English of *shkalneek*—usually rendered as “story”—should be “illustration.”²⁸ The gift brings the world into the mind and lights it up for the inner eye to see. And then the image demands to be further shared through the medium of language.

Seidayaa ends her life story by speaking of the changes in the society around her. People have become too concerned with money, she opines, and they “lack [a model for their] speech.” But, she goes on,

[157]

none of them seem to take offense at what I say.
I explain everything to them carefully, without anger,
you know, carefully.
And if they ask me about anything, such as sewing,
“This is what you do, this and that.”
If they say, “Cut out the pattern for me,”
[I do] what they say.
I don’t tell them, “Give me money,”
[but rather,] “Here it is, this is what you’ll do with it,
and then you do this [...]”
Sometimes
I cut out mitten patterns for them at this point. (Nyman 159)

To give gifts is to build solidarity, to create expectations without alienation. It is the key to a practice linking the past and the future, the pattern with the mitten, the model and the making. To use a Proustian vocabulary, it is a technique for transmuting memory into art.

In the opening pages of the *Recherche*, the life-altering gift of *mémoire involontaire* is triply bestowed. Most centrally by the narrator’s own mind, descending from nowhere like grace itself. But before that it is already twice bestowed: first by the narrator’s Tante Léonie, and then by his mother. Each literally gives him the madeleine and the tea—years apart, of course—that set in motion the mental discovery that makes possible the writing of the novel. The role of older

women as guardians of the gift is an under-appreciated aspect of Proust's novel. Like dreams and reveries, these women seem to carry with them memories of ancient times; they give them with abandon, if also a certain capriciousness. One antecedent of the *petite madeleine*, perhaps the first real model for the artist in the novel, is the grandmother as gift-giver:

The truth was that she could never permit herself to buy anything from which no intellectual profit was to be derived, above all the profit which fine things afford us by teaching us to seek our pleasures elsewhere than in the barren satisfaction of worldly wealth. Even when she had to make someone a present of the kind called 'useful,' when she had to give an arm-chair or some table-silver or a walking-stick, she would choose antiques, as though their long desuetude had effaced from them any semblance of utility and fitted them rather to instruct us in the lives of the men of other days than to serve the common requirements of our own. (1:42-43)²⁹

The grandmother gives gifts that refuse a present commercial utility in order to tell us of the lives of those who came before. They are transmissions from the past, and as such are beyond the vain and small concerns of the individual self. Their connection to the wellspring of language is made crystal clear in a [158] subsequent passage. "And even what in such pieces answered a material need, since it did so in a manner to which we are no longer accustomed, charmed her like those old forms of speech in which we can still see traces of metaphor whose fine point has been worn away by the rough usage of our modern tongue" (1:44).³⁰ There is a whole philosophy of tradition in these lines: what is old is what makes new, language becomes fresh by rising up to the surface from the recesses of its own historical forgetting.

I wish to end on a note of humility. *Ch'a aadéi yéi xat na.oo*, forgive me if I have caused any offense. To walk across cultures like this, let me say again, is risky, and I know I might have made missteps. Yet both Monsieur Proust and Mrs. Nyman offer gifts, and gifts call forth a response. The essential response is (paraphrasing Lewis Hyde again) to keep the words moving, to hand them along as best as we are able. If only we could all go down the Taku, then perhaps

we would have no need to lay the imperfect bandage of language across a broken world. But as it is, we pass the fragments of someone else's memory from mouth to ear and from eye to mind, so that we may one day prove worthy recipients of a gift that we can hope for, though never expect.

Outer Coast, Sitka, Alaska

Notes

1. Thanks are due to Emily Drukman for diligent and rapid-fire research assistance on this project, as well as for madeleines, salmon-skin bags, and many other gifts that bridge the very distance crossed by this essay. As with all my work on Tlingit, enormous thanks also go to the Lingít Nerdz Ƙu.oo. They taught me everything I know about the central thesis of this essay: that the gift is the bridge between cultures. An especial thanks to Yeilt'ooch' Tláa Collyne Bunn and L Jáaƙk' Alice Taff, to whom this essay is dedicated. *Aatlein gunalchéesh. Yeeɣsɣán*. Errors and eccentricities of interpretation are mine alone.
2. There is some orthographic complexity to writing about Elizabeth Nyman's stories. Her published stories are recorded in Jeff Leer's Tlingit writing system, developed for the Interior Tlingit dialect. However, a different system, developed for Coastal Tlingit by Constance Naish and Gillian Story (and subsequently much revised), has become by far the more common, even standard, orthography for Tlingit (including in the Interior). At the risk of sowing confusion, but out of respect for the daily usage of the coastal system within the community, I am using both orthographies here. They are distributed as follows: when quoting directly from Nyman's text, I use Leer's orthography. When referring to common proper names within the body of my essay (for instance, clan names) that also appear in Nyman's text, I put them first in Leer's orthography and then, in parentheses, the coastal (Naish-Story) orthography; I use the Naish-Story orthography for any further mentions of these proper names in the body of the text. When using Tlingit that comes from outside of Leer's text, I use only coastal orthography. The two systems have three differences: First, uvular consonants (voiced and voiceless uvular plosives, plus voiceless uvular fricative) are rendered as *gh*, *kh* and *xh* in Leer, but *g*, *k* and *x* in Naish-Story. Second, Leer uses the barred "l" to indicate the voiceless lateral fricative, which in coastal orthography is rendered by "l" [159] without diacritics. Third, vowels, which vary by length and tone in Tlingit, are rendered in each by a substantially different system. In Naish-Story, pairs of long and short vowels within the same vowel class are contrasted as follows: *a—aa*; *e—ei*; *u—oo*; *i—ee*. In Leer, long vowels are written the same as the short vowels of their vowel class, except that a grave accent is added: *a—à*; *e—è*; *u—ù*; *i—ì*. Tlingit is tonal; high tone in both orthographies is marked by an acute accent on the vowel, with the exception that the long and high vowel in Leer is marked by a circumflex (a grave and acute combined). Thus Naish-Story *éi* becomes Leer *ê*, while Naish-Story *ée* becomes Leer *î*. The pronunciation of Tlingit is notoriously hard for Indo-European language speakers, but a rough guide can be found in Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, eds., *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors: Tlingit Oral Narrative* (Juneau and Seattle: Sealaska Heritage Foundation and U of Washington, 1987), 41–48.
3. Elizabeth Nyman and Jeff Leer, *Gágiwdul.àt: Brought Forth to Reconfirm: The Legacy of a Taku River Tlingit Clan* (Whitehorse: Yukon Native Language Center and Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center, 1993), 153. Brackets in the English translation are Jeff Leer's own, which he puts in whenever he feels that he must add extra context not literally present in the Tlingit.
4. Suraj Ahmed, "Notes from Babel: Toward a Colonial History of Comparative Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, 39:2 (Winter 2013): 296–326.
5. See the genealogical table following Nyman 256. Ƙinx.ashee was in fact the mother of Elizabeth's father's second wife, once he remarried after Elizabeth's mother's death.

6. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, trans., 3 vols. (New York: Vintage, 1982), 1:11. “Ce n’est pas comme cela que vous le rendrez robuste et énergique, disait-elle tristement, surtout ce petit qui a tant besoin de prendre des forces et de la volonté.” Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Jean-Yves Tadié, gen. ed., 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), I: 11.

7. “on la voyait dans le jardin vide et fouetté par l’averse, relevant ses mèches désordonnées et grises pour que son front s’imbibât mieux de la salubrité du vent et de la pluie. Elle disait: ‘Enfin on respire!’ et parcourait les allées détrempées—trop symétriquement alignées à son gré par le nouveau jardinier dépourvu du sentiment de la nature et auquel mon père avait demandé depuis le matin si le temps s’arrangerait—de son petit pas enthousiaste et saccadé, réglé sur les mouvements divers qu’excitaient dans son âme l’ivresse de l’orage, la puissance de l’hygiène, la stupidité de mon éducation et la symétrie des jardins, plutôt que le désir inconnu d’elle d’éviter à sa jupe prune les taches de boue sous lesquelles elle disparaissait jusqu’à une hauteur qui était toujours pour sa femme de chambre un désespoir et un problème” (CS I: 11).

8. These pages on the wild are indebted to the thinking in Robert Bringham, “The Mind of the Wild,” *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis*, Robert Bringham and Jan Zwicky eds. (Regina: U of Regina P, 2018).

9. As, for instance, in the ivy-covered façade of a gothic church the narrator visits at Balbec: “Dans le bloc de verdure devant lequel on me laissa, il fallait pour reconnaître une église faire un effort qui me fit serrer de plus près l’idée d’église; en effet, comme il arrive aux élèves qui saisissent plus complètement le sens d’une phrase quand on les oblige par la version ou par le thème à la dévêtir des formes auxquelles ils sont accoutumés, cette idée d’église dont je n’avais guère besoin d’habitude devant des clochers qui se faisaient reconnaître d’eux-mêmes, j’étais obligé d’y faire perpétuellement appel pour ne pas oublier, ici que le cintre de cette touffe de lierre était celui d’une verrière ogivale, là, que la saillie des feuilles était due au relief d’un chapiteau” (JF II:75). “In the mass of verdure in front of which I was left standing I was obliged, in order to recognize a church, to make a mental effort which involved my grasping more intensely the idea ‘Church.’ In fact, as happens to schoolboys who gather more fully the meaning of a sentence when they are made, by translating or by paraphrasing it, to divest it of the forms to which they are accustomed, I was obliged perpetually to refer back to this idea of ‘Church,’ which as a rule I scarcely needed when I stood beneath steeples that were recognizable in themselves, in order not to forget, here that the arch of this clump of ivy was that of a Gothic window, there that the salience of the leaves was due to the carved relief of a capital” (1:768–69).

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10. Robert Bringham, “The Meaning of Mythology,” *Everywhere Being is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008), 63.

11. “mais mon ravissement était devant les asperges, trempées d’outre-mer et de rose, et dont l’épi, finement pignoché de mauve et d’azur, se dégrade insensiblement jusqu’au pied— encore souillé pourtant du sol de leur plant—par des irisations qui ne sont pas de la terre. Il me semblait que ces nuances célestes trahissaient les délicieuses créatures qui s’étaient amusées à se métamorphoser en légumes et qui, à travers le déguisement de leur chair comestible et ferme, laissaient apercevoir en ces couleurs naissantes d’aurore, en ces ébauches d’arc-en-ciel, en cette extinction de soirs bleus, cette essence précieuse que je reconnaissais encore quand, toute la nuit qui suivait un dîner où j’en avais mangé, elles jouaient, dans leurs farces poétiques et grossières comme une féerie de Shakespeare, à changer mon pot de chambre en un vase de parfum” (CS I:119).

12. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1957), 136.

13. For more thoughts on the abuse of the word myth, and the reasons why it should be returned to a place of honor, see Matthew Spellberg, “Myth and Anarchy,” *Yale Review*, 107:2 (April 2019): 92–123.

14. This is an old story, deeply inscribed into Western intellectual history by many hundreds of thinkers going back at least to Giambattista Vico. For one of the most profound recent accounts of this shift (or apparent shift) in

Western culture, see Malcolm Bull, *The Mirror of the Gods: Classical Mythology in Renaissance Art* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

15. See Curtius's description of how pieces of the "eternal language of dreams" lie dormant for centuries in European literature only to erupt, suddenly, in Balzac. E. H. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1953), 105. It is worth noting parenthetically here how mystical some of the foundational texts of comparative literature really are—I am thinking not only of Curtius, but of Auerbach's *Mimesis*, with its flashes of pointillistic analysis stringing together a narrative of Western civilization as if by faith alone.

16. Once as a graduate student I presented to some colleagues a Haida narrative—Gandll Walter MacGregor's "He Who Was Hunting Birds in His Father's Village," told in the year 1900—alongside Yeats's sonnet "Leda and the Swan," published in 1928. Both are tellings of an ancient story about the coupling of a human and a bird. It was immediately objected by a classicist that Yeats was "too modern" to compare to this Haida story, which should be read alongside Homer or Pindar. And yet, for all the similarities between Haida story and Homer, there are also plenty to Irish poetry of the same period: they are both works of the twentieth century, they were both composed in the shadow of British colonialism, they both emerged from a cultural context that was still rich but highly threatened.

17. Many thanks to Kaagwáask' Ishmael Hope for rich conversations on this topic. He has written on the oral formula in as-yet unpublished teaching materials that accompany his translation of the Kaagwaantaan Clan History told by Deikeenaak'w. More on oral formula in Tlingit is also due to appear in a volume of Tlingit stories currently in preparation by myself and Hope.

18. "Je savais que là résidaient des chatelains, le duc et la duchesse de Guermantes, je savais qu'ils étaient des personnages réels et actuellement existants, mais chaque fois que je pensais à eux, je me les représentais tantôt en tapisserie, comme était la Comtesse de Guermantes, dans le "Couronnement d'Esther" de notre église, tantôt de nuances changeantes comme était Gilbert le Mauvais dans le vitrail où il passait du vert chou au bleu prune selon que j'étais encore à prendre de l'eau bénite ou que j'arrivais à nos chaises [...] enfin toujours enveloppés du mystère du temps mérovingiens et baignant comme dans un coucher de soleil dans la lumière orangée qui émane de cette syllabe: 'antes'" (CS I:169).

19. Jeff Leer, "The History of a Tlingit Name," *Language and Culture in Native North America: Studies in Honor of Heinz-Jürgen Pinnow*, Michael Dürr, Egon Renner, and Wolfgang Oleschinski, eds. (Munich: LINCOM, 1995), 154.

20. *Lingít* means "human being," as does the endonym of many Indigenous languages: Haida, Diné, etc. See the great carver Bill Reid's essay, "Haida Means Human Being," *Solitary Raven: The Essential Writings of Bill Reid*, Robert Bringhurst, ed. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), 146–61.

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21. These last few lines are beautifully evocative in Tlingit. Leer gives literal translations in his footnotes as "From my heart I always do so to him; he just falls about in my heart. Carefully, carefully, I work with him/her" (Nyman 127, notes 22 and 23).

22. There are resonances here with a pervasive motif in Northwest Coast storytelling: the abandoned or derided child who makes contact with the spirit world and becomes a figure of great power, eventually returning to the community that had rejected him to become a leader and provider. This motif perhaps suggests that the tension between an absolute reverence for lineage and a sense of its potential for unfairness is a throughline in Northwest Coast culture, a paradox that great tradition bearers long contemplated and warned about. See Deikeenaak'w, "The Shaman Who Went into the Fire, and the Heron's Son," *Tlingit Myths and Texts*, John R. Swanton, ed. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), 267–79; and Henry Tate's telling of the "The Prince Who Was Deserted," *Tsimshian Mythology*, Franz Boas, ed. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1916), 225–32.

23. “et même Swann, que j’avais connu, je me reprochais de ne pas avoir fait assez attention à lui, de n’y avoir pas fait attention avec assez de désintéressement, de ne pas l’avoir bien écouté quand il me recevait en attendant que sa femme rentrât déjeuner et qu’il me montrait de belles choses, maintenant que je savais qu’il était comparable à l’un des plus beaux causeurs d’autrefois” (*P* III:708).

24. Marcel Mauss, “Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques,” *L’Année sociologique*, 1 (1923–24): 30–186. In English as *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, W. D. Halls, trans. (London: Routledge, 1990). See especially pgs. 5–7 in the latter.

25. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1983), 4. The analysis in this final section of my essay is particularly indebted to Hyde. My thanks to Grace Greenwald for introducing me to this book on a rare sunny Sitka day.

26. For definitive works on the Tlingit *ku.éex*, see Sergei Kan, *Symbolic Immortality: The Tlingit Potlatch of the 19th Century* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 2016), and Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer, eds. *Haa Tuwunáagu Yís, for Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory* (Seattle and Juneau: Sealaska Heritage Foundation and U of Washington, 1990). The *ku.éex* came roaring back to life in 2022 after a pandemic hiatus with beautiful ceremonies throughout Lingít Aaní; I was privileged to see the first full post-pandemic herring *ku.éex* in Sitka, hosted by the Kiks.ádi Clan in April of 2022.

27. This comment is made in light of a story about repairing her father-in-law’s headstone; the erection and maintenance of a headstone are of great importance in Tlingit culture, and they are a major reason for a *ku.éex*. Seidayaa’s father tells her to say to the others, “‘Fix up [your father-in-law’s] grave the way I tell you; he is the one by whose wisdom I gained life,’ this is what you will say” (Nyman 151). Thus the gift given in life can be reciprocated in death, and the pain of sharing the world with the living is transmuted into the reverence of a gift to those passed on.

28. My thanks to Chályee Will Geiger for reporting this to me, and also for his permission to use this anecdote.

29. “En réalité, elle ne se résignait jamais à rien acheter dont on ne pût tirer un profit intellectuel, et surtout celui que nous procurent les belles choses en nous apprenant à chercher notre plaisir ailleurs que dans les satisfactions du bien-être et de la vanité. Même quand elle avait à faire à quelqu’un un cadeau dit utile, quand elle avait à donner un fauteuil, des couverts, une canne, elle les cherchait “anciens,” comme si leur longue désuétude ayant effacé leur caractère d’utilité, ils paraissaient plutôt disposés pour nous raconter la vie des hommes d’autrefois que pour servir aux besoins de la nôtre” (*CS* I: 39).

30. “Même ce que dans les meubles nous répondait à un besoin, comme c’était d’une façon à laquelle nous ne sommes pas habitués, la charmait comme les vieilles manières de dire où nous voyons une métaphore, effacée, dans notre moderne langage, par l’usure de l’habitude” (I:40).