UNSUBMITTED: REFLECTIONS ON ACADEMIC RESTRAINT

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ABSTRACT

This is a personal reflection on the choice to not submit a library researched paper about a sacred Mowachaht belonging. I made this choice due to concerns about the spiritual power of the cultural belonging that I had been writing about, and because I did not have the knowledge or relations to know whether I could safely disseminate words about it. Instead of submitting that paper, I submit this reflection on politics of becoming entangled in Indigenous governance. Doing so can entail working to unentangle oneself from certain scholarly traditions to which many anthropologists may feel entitled or obliged.

INTRODUCTION

I spent much of last summer researching and writing a paper. Thinking that it would make a useful contribution to PlatForum's collection of my peers' work on the theme of entanglement, I revisited and edited it for publication. Then I decided not to submit it. Instead, I offer some reflections on the politics – and poetics – of my choice. In brief, my emerging sense is that anthropology's claimed recognition of the seriousness of Indigenous ontologies and material agency (Blaser 2013:550, 559; Di Giminani 2013:541; Piliavsky 2017:14; Rodman 1992:641; Thom 2017:143) must guide

more than just theory. If anthropology is to be an anti-colonial or decolonizing practice, we as anthropologists and as people must work to (and work out how to) adhere to the Indigenous forms of governance that we are accustomed to simply thinking and speaking about.[1]

The paper that I wrote deals with a Mowachaht cultural and spiritual belonging that was collected from Yuquot, on northwestern Vancouver Island, by George Hunt in the early years of the 20th century.[2] It has been in storage in the American Museum of Natural History in New York ever since. Several anthropologists and Nuu-chah-nulth scholars have published about this belonging over this period (Boas 1930; Brody 1994; Coté 2010; Jonaitis 1999; Mowachaht-Muchahlaht First Nation 2000; Umeek 2011). Indeed, the Mowachaht-Muchalaht First Nation (2000) has given formal permission to study and publish about it, so I did not see my writing as an intrusion. But there was a reason that it was deemed necessary for the band council to discuss this permission at all. Prior to their resolution, questions had been raised by Elders over whether the topic of this belonging should be discussed even by Mowachaht people as a collective, let alone by outsiders, due to the powerful nature of the belonging in question. The ethnographic literature echoes the Elders' concern (Boas 1930:266, 268; Jonaitis 1999:xii-xiii, 9-10). According to the Mowachaht-Muchalaht First Nation (2000:22-23), however, there is now consensus that repatriation is necessary for this belonging, and that scholarship can aid in that aim.

Although I felt that my literature-based research made a relevant argument about the danger of assimilating sacred materials into secular, capitalist, colonial, and institutional frameworks, I was guilty of such assimilation myself by writing a paper about a belonging that Elders have long said should not be discussed openly. While this dilemma highlights tensions which sometimes exist between band councils and community-recognized knowledge keepers, my paper would likely do little to aid the council's intended repatriation work. In short, I have come to question my ability to ethically entangle myself with this topic as someone who has minimal immediate relations with the Mowachaht community.

We all know the catch-phrase of academic life: publish or perish. This quantitative measure of scholarly success motivates accelerating

production of mobilizable (if not mobilized) knowledge. The paradoxical sense that we must publish papers that are unlikely to be widely read may help make poor writing permissible. Having slogged through many theory papers in which the weeds of language outweigh the tuber of insight that they conceal, I suspect that I am not the only scholar who has been tempted to disseminate an idea before learning to effectively communicate it. Who can blame us? Considering the pressures of academic life and the readership of academic articles, it seems that we are directed toward a world where scholars write not to be read, but to plant a flag of discovery upon an idea so that none may intrude without delivering the tribute of citation, the currency of academic status.[3]

Whether or not what I pulled back from submitting was poor writing, it was potentially unethical writing. Not unethical in the eyes of colonial law or tradition, in terms of university ethics policies, nor in the sense that I hurt anyone by researching it.[4] It was potentially unethical in the sense that I knew enough to know that there could be impacts to publicly discussing my topic, but not enough to know what those impacts could be. It might have been all too easy to brush off such concerns. But writing is how we in academic traditions share ideas that we believe to be important and potentially, at least, powerful. Responsibility and honour to our words should not be submitted to neoliberal academic demands.

One response might be that we need common bases of communication as academics: fora to try things out and share unfinished ideas. I agree. Conferences and seminars are great places to converse, try new ideas, and hear feedback. And so is publication, if it is done intentionally and carefully.[5] In some cases, however, there may also be something subtly insidious about the emphasis that we need common bases of communication as *academics*. When a recent guest lecturer described a discrepancy between his data and community accounts, an audience member challenged him on his apparent ontological privileging of a scientific paradigm. His response was that "we" – that is, anthropologists – need to have a common basis of conversation. I agree, but simultaneously question the apparent insistence that we should be able to discuss such discrepancies in the academy even if we do not or (think we) cannot discuss them with those who we unilaterally represent and implicate.

This may be a complex question in many contexts, but its implications in the case of my paper seem clear to me.

It can be hard to put aside or re-think projects, especially when they are apparently near completion and are – on the academy's terms at least – good scholarship. But when I face the difficulty of this decision I think about conversations with Indigenous scholars and community members who navigate the difficulties of what they can and cannot share about their communities, only to be faced with white academics like myself who too often show no such qualms (for more on these implications, see Araluen 2018). Audra Simpson speaks of how and why Indigenous peoples are sometimes compelled to act in "excluding and illiberal ways" (2011:210), such as what she calls "ethnographic refusal," "for the express purpose of protecting the concerns of the community" (2014:105). This is an unfortunate state of affairs, but it should be an understandable one. By feeling at liberty to share what we should not, some anthropologists have created conditions in which interlocutors must self-censor because they cannot trust us to.

So why, beyond whinging, have I submitted *this*? Why not just decide not to submit a paper that needs more work and leave it at that? Partly because I have recently seen similar situations requiring academic restraint arise, leading me to think that this can be a worthwhile conversation to have. But also because I feel that withholding can be as generative, educational, and interesting as sharing, and that both must be done right. That some territory should not be accessible to settler power or presence tells us something about the reality of Indigenous sovereignty. That some belongings and materials have potentially dangerous power and agency that should not be engaged with without the right knowledge and relations tells us something about the reality of Indigenous ontologies. That some knowledge is not intended to be shared broadly tells us something about the nature of that knowledge. Following or contravening these laws have impacts that may be intellectualizable, but that is the tip (not the *point*) of the iceberg. Can Indigenous knowledges and sovereignties be understood, instead, through the embodied, emotional, and intellectual experiences of settler academic restraint, of not intruding, of not sharing? Through action, but also through inaction? Learning which knowledge to share indiscriminately and which not to is part of

trying to abide by Indigenous governance, rather than just theorizing it. Occasionally, submitting to Indigenous governance may mean not submitting to academic journals.

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[1] My focus here is on people similar to myself: white settler students of anthropology. All readers, however, whether of similar background or not, will need to determine for themselves if and how these reflections apply to their work.

[2] The term "belongings" refers to many things which have been called "artifacts" or "objects" in museum discourse, working to centre ongoing Indigenous relations to these materials rather than objectivist and objectifying Eurocentric categorization. George Hunt (1854-1933) was a Kwakwa̱ka'wakw anthropologist and associate of Franz Boas, founder of North American anthropology.

[3] James C. Scott (2012:105-111) takes the direction of this trend to its logical end in a near-future academic dystopia where the policy of "participatory autocracy" has rationalized faculty governance, "in keeping with the neoliberal emphasis on transparency, full public disclosure, and objectivity…" Charles Menzies (2017) reflects on the colonial and authoritarian bases of the discovery paradigm in academia. Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne's (2017:954-955, 961-966) discussion demonstrates the hegemony of uncritical (dis)engagement with sources based on quantitative ratings.

[4] As a library researched paper, all the information that I was articulating had already been made publicly available, either by the community in question or scholars who had engaged with them. My considerations here, however, may raise questions of how to engage with already-available information, as opposed to original field research which has long been the topic of ethical debates.

[5] I hope that the present offering can be such a contribution.

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