

Pipelines and the Poetics of Place

Nigel Haggan

Bringing a Fuller Set of Values into Environmental Assessment

As “tar sands,” the Alberta bitumen deposits are a vector for protest. As “oil sands,” they are hailed as vital to Canada’s economy. The Enbridge Northern Gateway and Kinder Morgan pipeline and tanker proposals to ship expanded production through British Columbia’s waters attract an incredible outpouring of passion and creativity.

This outpouring is a classic example of the *poetics of place* or, in other words, every way in which our relationships with place and planet can be understood and expressed. Some of this is recorded *inside* Canada’s National Energy Board hearings. More takes place *outside*: as Aboriginal ceremony, treaties, law-suits, injunctions, art, film, music, the prayers of Indigenous Elders for threatened waters, and the words of religious leaders from Desmond Tutu in Fort McMurray to Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical on climate change. ‘Yágis, the ancestral guardian spirit portrayed in a mask by Heiltsuk artist Nusi (Ian Reid), signifies the collision between the measurable values of need and

desire and those values that cannot or should not be measured.

The project *Pipelines and the Poetics of Place* is designed to bring art, Indigenous spirituality, ecology, eco-theology, ecological economics, and Indigenous and Canadian law into conversation on how project review might entertain a fuller range of values. The objectives are to (a) *Expand* the perceptual scope of environmental review to include Indigenous spirituality, religion, and art, as well as the voices of those impacted and marginalized; (b) *Explore* how Aboriginal and religious ceremony and theater can create spaces that are physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually safe

and welcoming to all comers; (c) *Invite* modes of expression that will make environmental assessment reviews accessible to people of all ages and all educational and cultural backgrounds; and (d) *Launch* a multi-year program to promote transformative change in environmental practice, policy, and law.

Above: The ancestral guardian spirit ‘Yágis hunts down oil tankers. Mask by Heiltsuk artist Nusi (Ian Reid). University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology (UBC MOA) exhibit by Heiltsuk curator Pam Brown. Photo: UBC MOA Archives, Vancouver, Canada – William McLennan fonds, 2014. Reproduced with permission

Pipelines and the Poetics of Place draws a parallel between how homes, lifeways, and habitats are torn up to distill sand and bitumen into synthetic oil that can flow through a pipeline, and how Canada's National Energy Board review distills and pipelines the poetics of place to decision-makers in dispassionate scientific language, tables, and graphs. What is lost in translation? What values are excluded or under-represented? How might these values, and the stories that bring them to life, be conveyed to people of all ages and all cultural and educational backgrounds?

The National Energy Board is mandated to "represent the ever-changing interests and concerns of Canadians" in a "sustainable energy future." What then are these "interests and concerns"? In its preamble, Canada's Species at Risk Act states: "...wildlife, in all its forms, has value in and of itself

and is valued by Canadians for aesthetic, cultural, spiritual, recreational, educational, historical, economic, medical, ecological and scientific reasons."

"Lists of atomistic or disembodied values, such as those in the ecosystem services literature, only come to life through stories."

This list typifies the ecosystem valuation literature. Major studies, such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, concur with Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen that commitment to intangible values often outweighs material interests. Translation to dollar equivalents, however, is then justified on the need to influence decision-makers, the difficulty of measuring spiritual values, and outright dismissal of religious or spiritual values as inappropriate in a pluralistic society—a dismissal that fails to recognize

Salmon and the Poetics of Place



The Salmon of Science

Rivers and streams carry nutrients and young salmon to the Pacific Ocean. Returning salmon spawn and die, contributing thousands of tonnes of nitrogen, phosphorus, and carbon to freshwater and forest ecosystems. The size of past salmon runs is reflected in the growth rings of riverside trees. At least two hundred creatures, from people to bears to insects, transport nutrients into the forest. Marine and terrestrial nitrogen are different isotopes (^{15}N vs ^{14}N), so it is possible to trace the influence of salmon runs as far as one kilometer from the water's edge.

The First Salmon Ceremony

The scientific detective story that showed the relationship between salmon, cedars, and wildlife has a much earlier and more eloquent telling in the First Salmon Ceremony celebrated throughout the

Pacific Northwest. Spring is a hungry time, so people watch eagerly for the first salmon to return, but in fact the ceremony doesn't take place until knowledge-holders declare that sufficient numbers of these fish have reached the spawning beds. A welcome feast is then held where salmon are eaten and the remains respectfully returned to the river. If all is done properly, the spirit of the salmon will travel downriver to tell the rest of the salmon people that they were well treated, thus ensuring their return the following year. The First Salmon Ceremony is reminiscent of the Irish story about the Salmon of Knowledge.

The Salmon of Knowledge

This is a story of the boyhood of the Irish hero Finn McCumhaill (pronounced "McCool") and the Salmon of Knowledge, *An Bradán Feasa*. The Hazel tree is the first thing to come into creation. Nine hazels surround a pool in the otherworld. The Salmon became wise by eating the nuts that fell into the pool.

A scholar fished in vain for seven years before he finally caught the Salmon. He set it to roast over a fire, but was overtaken by an urgent call of nature. Just then, young Finn happened along the riverbank, so the scholar called out: "*Here! Young fella! Mind that fish*

Above: Salmon gain their wisdom by eating the nuts that fall from nine hazel trees around a pool in the otherworld. Artwork: Emily Haggan, 2015

that compassion or the “golden rule” are central to all religions and Indigenous spiritualities. Meanwhile, entire dimensions of moral concern go unaddressed.

The *issue* then is the capacity of environmental review panels to entertain intangible values and represent them in their reports and recommendations. Also, lists of atomistic or disembodied values, such as those in the ecosystem services literature, only come to life through stories that take many forms: myths, maps, parables, equations, ecological and climate models, art, tables, music, graphs, journal articles, and more. While the focus here is on the Alberta tar sands, the approach is equally applicable to massive hydropower projects, such as the Site C Dam in northern British Columbia, and to local and regional ecosystem-based management and response to global climate change.

The *core value* of the project is welcoming different ways of understanding and being in the world. We are open to ideas and modes of expression that are incommensurable with our formal training and strive for openness to things that our upbringing has not equipped us to recognize. We anticipate that the epistemic virtue of *compassionate listening* will *reveal*, as opposed to some rational notion of *discovery* or *invention*. We see our work as a work of *Creative Justice*, that is, reuniting or reconciling those separated by forces outside their control. In one respect, the project is a humble successor to Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In another, it is a way to unsettle victorious linear narratives of science, religion, and law that justified residential schools, and whose cultural shadow still determines who can participate in environmental governance. The desired outcome is a step towards *epistemic* or *cognitive justice*.

for me that it not burn!” and ran for the trees. Finn watched the fish. Thinking it was done on one side, he turned it over, but in so doing he burned his thumb. He put his sore thumb in his mouth and along with it a piece of the Salmon’s skin. Returning from the woods, the scholar saw the light in Finn’s eyes and, with philosophical resignation, allowed him to eat the rest of the fish. Ever after, when Finn was losing at chess or in battle or when enmeshed in sorcery, he only had to chew on his thumb to prevail or escape.

The Riverside Tree

The riverside tree in this image can be many things: timber for industry; inspiration for the Buddha or Isaac Newton; Lao Tzu’s riff on the usefulness of the useless; or a relative to Indigenous people. The tiny roots that draw water and nutrients from bedrock might signify individual connection to the ground of being, the ecological or collective unconscious. The roots converge in families, societies, Aboriginal spiritualities, religions, art, natural and social science, and the humanities. The salmon sheltering under the roots is an avatar for the flow of knowledge between ocean, rivers, plants, and animals in Aboriginal ceremony, Irish tradition, and the scientific story of marine nitrogen.

As a symbol, the tree welcomes different ways of understanding and being in the world without privileging one over another. The trunk

is the conversation. The branches are the products of our work. The tree symbol can be read at many levels. The tree and its creatures as *beings* in their own right. The *connections* beloved of the ecological, climate, and economic modelers in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. The *spaces* between the connections where unseen fauna and flora flourish. The *flows* of air and water that nourish and support but defy notions of individual agency. The *resonant voices* of wind and water, animals and people. The *dance* of waves and branches that inspires music, song, and ceremony. The *visible* sunlight that feeds the tree. The *invisible* Internet that carries the voices of loggers, conservation organizations, and our project: the fungal “internet” that connects forest trees. Some of these elements are quantifiable; more are not.



Above: The roots of the riverside tree shelter the Salmon of Knowledge and suggest converging ways of understanding the world. Artwork: Emily Haggan, 2016

Play is at the heart of our work. Play combines concentration with cooperation and openness. It adds delight to the absolute attention of research, prayer, or worship. It extends interdisciplinarity by interweaving graphic, musical, and performative elements. Weaving play into collaborative work is a gift. It requires messengers of joy and absurdity

“Weaving play into collaborative work is a gift. It requires messengers of joy and absurdity to bring to life activities that are supposed to break down barriers but can actually deepen discomfort.”

to bring to life activities that are supposed to break down barriers but can actually deepen discomfort. Play here includes creative disruptions that recognize and nudge or jolt tension / boredom / disbelief / dissent / anger into another space of dance, dialogue, or skit, and that transform the theoretical

and technical into the hilarious and comprehensible. Our messengers of joy include an inspirational choir leader with the challenge of harmonizing voices that have not sung together, or at least not in public, for hundreds of years, improvisation artists, participants, stand-up comics, and slam poets.

To say that the voices of science and economics are too loud is unfair to scientist and economist friends and colleagues who are passionately committed to the flourishing of species, places, and people. The problem is that the narrow focus of environmental review forces science into a confrontational role, where project economics vie with jobs and revenue at risk from catastrophic oil spills. Their voices are not too loud, just too lonely. The voices of Indigenous spirituality, of religion as compassion for the poor and for impoverished nature, of musicians, poets, and painters are as lonely outside the wall as the scientists and economists are inside.

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” (Robert Frost). A wall that has been centuries in the building cannot be demolished in one go. But we can knock



Above: Participants in the *Values, Stories, and Modes of Expression* workshop consider what matters where land, air, water, food, and people come together—and they enjoy the food! Herring spawn on kelp is a traditional delicacy for coastal First Nations in British Columbia. People harvest fronds of the giant Pacific kelp, *Macrocystis integrifolia*, then suspend them from wooden frames. The herring spawn on both sides, in layers up to 1 cm thick. Photos: Ngaio Hotte, 2017

enough stones off the top to allow people to climb over in both directions. The workshop *Values, Stories, and Modes of Expression*, held in Vancouver, British Columbia, in April 2017 took the first step in reuniting voices separated by forces beyond their control. One of the highlights was a lunch hosted by the *Tu'wusht* Aboriginal program and staff and students at the University of British Columbia Farm. We had a spirited conversation about values and commitments where land, air, water, food, and people come together. But, really, the food spoke for itself.

“A wall that has been centuries in the building cannot be demolished in one go. But we can knock enough stones off the top to allow people to climb over in both directions.”

The ecological imperative to reach a new covenant with the planet suggests that, in time, the *Pipelines and the Poetics of Place* project might provide process design and advice to government and industry. Forward-thinking universities might also consider expanding their “resource management” schools to include aesthetic, spiritual, and religious perspectives alongside natural and social sciences and engineering.

When we reach for the infinite, we must rely on stories. So, I'll leave the last words to that ancient and wily navigator of myth, map, model, and metaphor...

The Salmon of Knowledge

I am a term in an equation
 Connection in a model
 I am a noun in a government report
 And a verb in the river
 I am a scintilla of stardust
 A sparkle of sunlight
 I am the depth of the sea
 I am the life of the river
 I am the death and resurrection
 A chorus of carbon
 A net of nitrogen
 A parable of potassium
 A psalm of phosphorus
 I am the dress of the cedar
 The brawn of the bear

 The dance of many peoples

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Nigel Haggan, PhD, grew up in Northern Ireland. Exposure to diverse cultures, notably work with Aboriginal people, opened his eyes to different worldviews. He is assembling a crew to unsettle environmental assessment with the values and commitments of art, Indigenous spirituality, religion, and grassroots conservation that reflect love as well as need.

Learn more about the *Pipelines and the Poetics of Place* project at <http://www.seannachie.ca/poetics.html>. A film of the *Values, Stories, and Modes of Expression* workshop will debut at the October 2017 Heart of the City Festival in Vancouver.

Further Reading

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"Humans need to connect with life and living things. We begin to feel and empathize with each other and build relationships that can lead to enormous change, influence, and insight into not just environmental issues but social issues as well. I am certain that just using scientific facts and figures we will not fully reconnect, but using stories, artwork, humble conversations, and the simple sharing of life experiences, both past and present, will give us a chance."

—Jean Thomas

