

Running head: AN EXPLORATION OF THE KTUNAXA CREATION STORIES

The Origins of Culture: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Ktunaxa Creation Stories

by

Tanya Laing Gahr

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Royal Roads University

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Virginia McKendry, PhD, Thesis Faculty Supervisor      Date  
School of Communication & Culture  
Royal Roads University

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Matthew Heinz, PhD, Internal Committee Member      Date  
School of Communication & Culture  
Royal Roads University

---

Melanie Sam, External Committee Member      Date  
Director of Traditional Knowledge and Language  
Ktunaxa Nation Council

---

Phillip Vannini, PhD, Thesis Coordinator      Date  
School of Communication & Culture  
Royal Roads University

### Abstract

This project explores the Ktunaxa Nation's creation stories in order to understand the significance of these narratives in the formation and maintenance of the Ktunaxa culture. These stories inform and support the Ktunaxa ways of knowing, their worldviews, their history pre- and post-contact, and their connection to the geography of the Ktunaxa territory. Performance theory has been used to identify the ways in which the stories were shared during the filming of this project, and narrative inquiry has been used to draw out the creation story's central themes and how they relate to the ethnophilosophy of the Ktunaxa people—the interdependence of humans with all of creation; lessons from the animals including *Skincuc̓* the Coyote; the trauma of residential schools and the impact that has had on the culture and stories of the Ktunaxa; the landforms within the territory; and the responsibilities of all human beings according to these teachings. The research reflections identify truths that emerged through the ceremony of storytelling—rules to live by, ways to approach those within and outside the culture, lessons about being part of a community, and how to pattern the people and the culture off of the surrounding wildlife and geography. These lessons and stories relate to and support the culture of the Ktunaxa, past and present, by providing a connection to the Ktunaxa landscape and all that is within it, and anchors the culture with stories of that place that have been told for many thousands of years. Finally, this project discusses how Aboriginal worldviews contribute to and nourish the field of communication studies.

This project is presented in two parts: the written document and a supporting video which can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zoUwn3xeDg>.

*Keywords:* Indigenous knowledge and culture; narrative influence; Ktunaxa; creation stories; communication studies; oral traditions, cultural extinction

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### Foreword

This thesis is the culmination of a year and a half of friendship, collaboration, and research. The project is presented in two parts: this written document and a 25-minute video, which can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zoUwn3xeDg>. Early on, when I conceived the idea for this project, it occurred to me that trying to capture on paper the nuances of traditional Ktunaxa stories—stories that are based in oral traditions and that have been shared in that manner since time immemorial—would be insufficient and limiting. The idea of filming several Ktunaxa storytellers sharing several of the culture’s foundational stories was supported by my advisors, Joshua Guilar and Virginia McKendry, who asked that a supporting document be provided as well. This written portion provides background information on the Ktunaxa First Peoples, the literature review, and a description of my methodology. I have also included brief research reflections, though I believe that the most profound insights are in the video and come from the Ktunaxa storytellers themselves. Although this document and the video are meant to be presented together, it is my hope that the information on the video speaks for itself.

Secondly, I use the terms *First Nations*, *Aboriginal*, and *Indigenous* within this paper. I recognize and appreciate that none of these terms is universally applicable or even desired by the people represented by these labels. However, in the interest of clarity, I have tried to use the term First Nations to refer to Canadian Aboriginal people who are not Inuit or Métis; Aboriginal, Aboriginal people, or Aboriginal Peoples to include Inuit and Métis; and Indigenous to include Canadian Aboriginal people as well as colonized Indigenous people in other parts of the world, including but not limited to the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. I have capitalized

these terms, as well as terms such as *Indigenist* or *Nation* that are derived from or refer to Indigenous people.

This project involved a personal process of decolonization that included historical research into the Canadian government's policies of assimilation within the Indian Act, discussions with Aboriginal people about the legacy of residential schools, and a growing awareness of current treaty processes. It was important to me that I seek to understand the effects of colonization not only on Indigenous people, but on settler Canadians as well. I endeavored to avoid the trap of "white guilt"—a role I felt would allow me to feel powerless and therefore immobile in the face of history—and instead worked (and continue to work) toward becoming an active and vocal ally. At the same time, I have tried to not become too self-congratulatory in the process of unlearning. I have learned to listen to my Aboriginal friends to know how best to support them, and how to help communicate Aboriginal issues to others so they might also take steps toward personal decolonization. During the height of the Idle No More movement in December 2012, I began to focus on what was meant by Aboriginal engagement. I took several workshops in this regard, and wrote and published a paper that examined how understanding Aboriginal worldviews could help those situated in Western ideologies resolve conflict (Laing Gahr, 2013). I have had several ongoing discussions with First Nations friends to help me navigate the dynamics of current Aboriginal realities resulting from colonization—poverty, addiction, political tensions, strained familial bonds, and lingering effects of the residential school system and the '60s Scoop'<sup>1</sup>. I also did my best to learn from elders who reminded me

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<sup>1</sup> The '60s Scoop refers to the removal of Aboriginal children in Canada between the years of 1960 and the mid-1980s. In many instances, children were removed from their homes and communities without the knowledge or

that language is a gift and to use it with intention and consideration. I made many blunders, and I was forgiven at every turn.

One of the lessons I have taken from seeking to understand Aboriginal worldviews is the value of holism rather than the more Western ideal of separating one's emotions from one's intellect. I have always struggled in trying to leave my heart behind and was worried when I pursued academia that there would be no place for spirit. As I worked on decolonizing, I discovered that my heart did indeed have a home.

Finally, the creation stories of the Ktunaxa are rich, detailed, and profoundly beautiful, and even video fails to capture how powerful the influence of these stories is. Any failure to fully convey their meaning, their significance, or their complexity is mine, and not that of the storytellers who were gracious enough to share with me.



### The Origins of Culture: An Exploration of the Ktunaxa Creation Stories

This project is an exploration of the Ktunaxa Nation's creation stories in order to understand the significance of these narratives in the formation and maintenance of the Ktunaxa (also known as the Kutenai/Kootenay in Canada, or the Ksanka or Kootenai in the U.S., hereafter referred to as the Ktunaxa for ease of reading) culture. These stories inform and support the Ktunaxa ways of knowing, their worldviews, their history pre- and post-contact, and their connection to the geography of the Ktunaxa territory. I have used performance theory to identify the ways in which the stories were shared during the filming of this project, and narrative inquiry to identify emerging themes of the creation story that relate to the ethnophilosophy of the Ktunaxa people. In my research reflections, I included themes that emerged through the ceremony of storytelling. These themes include establishing how the entire web of life is connected to the Ktunaxa people in a reciprocal relationship of honour and respect; how the Ktunaxa look at the animals as their brethren and learn lessons from them through observation and storytelling; how the character of *Skinku* (Coyote the Trickster), who is both scoundrel and hero in the Ktunaxa stories, provides day-to-day lessons for how to get along in the world; the trauma of residential schooling on the Ktunaxa stories and how these schools contributed to the destabilization of the culture; and, the ways in which the Ktunaxa connect story to geographical landmarks as both oral map and history lesson.

This work was a collaborative effort between the Ktunaxa Nation and myself, bringing together elders and storytellers from four of six communities within the Ktunaxa traditional territory: *ʔakisq̓nuk* (Columbia Lake Band in Windermere, B.C.), *ʔaq̓am* (St. Mary's Band near Cranbrook, B.C.), *ʔakinkum̓asnuq̓iʔit* (Tobacco Plains Band near Grasmere, B.C.), and *yaqan*

*nuʔkiy* (Lower Kootenay Band near Creston, B.C.); due to travel requirements, storytellers from the American communities of *ʔaʔanqmi* (Kootenai Tribe of Idaho near Bonners Ferry, Idaho) and *kupawičqʔnuk* (Ksanka Band from Elmo, Montana) were unable to attend. These elders and storytellers came together in order to participate in a ceremony of storytelling and exploration of the nation's foundational narratives. The key points of exploration included differences in the telling of the story, emerging themes that are reflected in the culture of the Ktunaxa, and indications that the traditional stories of the Ktunaxa still operate as living, evolving narratives.

### **Background**

I first heard Joe Pierre tell a traditional Ktunaxa story several years ago in Cranbrook, B.C., which is in the heart of Ktunaxa territory. Joe, who is a renowned storyteller in Cranbrook and in Ktunaxa communities, had been asked to tell a group of young business people a traditional story as a means of teaching us about the culture. I am not Ktunaxa, not Aboriginal, and though I was sympathetic to Aboriginal issues in Canada, I had limited understanding of the damage that colonization had done to Indigenous culture, language, philosophies, and conceptions. Listening to the story that day, I had my first glimpse of the connection the Ktunaxa have to this part of the world.

Joe shared the story of two young warriors who wanted to join a raiding party that would take them into Blackfoot territory in order to retrieve some stolen Ktunaxa horses. The other raiding party members treated the youngest warriors with some derision, but they turned out to be essential to the task at hand. The youngest warriors were able to call upon magic in order to provide for the rest of the party and bring home the horses without any bloodshed.

Joe said he didn't know what story he would be sharing until he arrived to meet with our group because he wanted to share from the heart, which was apparent in both his telling of the story and the rapt attention of the group listening. I remember being struck by Joe's telling of the story, and particularly by how much of the surrounding landscape was featured in the story and how familiar these landmarks were to everyone in the room. Joe was describing places we knew very well, and the story became a little dearer to us because of that. So it is with the Ktunaxa creation story—or stories, more precisely—that connect the Ktunaxa people to the territory they have lived upon since time immemorial.

The central creation story describes the preparations for the newest inhabitants of the earth—the First Nations people, or *ʔaq̓smaknik*—by the spirit world's great chiefs, as well as the events that led to the creation and naming of the landmarks within the Ktunaxa territory. In fact, one of the many purposes of the creation story is to map the boundaries of the territory (J. Pierre, personal communication, March 30, 2012). The creation story is part of a larger tapestry of stories that are interwoven throughout the central narrative; many of these describe the formation of the land while others provide lessons on how to live upon it and how to interact with all things—the earth and its elements, the creatures and plants that inhabit it, the people one will meet in their life's journey, and our responsibilities to those who came before and will follow behind (H. Alpine, personal communication, March 16, 2013). Traditionally, the creation stories could take three to six days to tell (M. Sam, personal communication, March 30, 2012).

Cultural touchstones such as creation stories are important ways in which traditional knowledge is shared, and this knowledge is threatened within numerous Aboriginal cultures, including the Ktunaxa. For 10,000-14,000 years the Ktunaxa First People have lived in

southeastern B.C., northern Idaho, and northern Montana (Ktunaxa.org, Who Are The Ktunaxa section). The Ktunaxa language is an isolate—there are no related language families in the world, and only 22 fluent speakers of the language remain. With the loss of language, there is the very real concern about the loss of traditional knowledge (Canadian Council for the Arts, 2012, p. 1). Work that examines Indigenous stories and traditional knowledge is critical, especially as those cultures have been threatened by historic (and arguably current) governmental policies of assimilation both in Canada and the U.S., and indeed, throughout the world (Canadian Council for the Arts, 2012, p. 6). Horsethief (2011) noted that privileged societies—those that are not “dispossessed and disempowered”—are not in danger of losing language, stories, customs, or other touchstones of culture (p. 1). If these touchstones are extinguished in an Indigenous culture such as that of the Ktunaxa people, the entirety of that nation’s traditional knowledge and ways of knowing will also be lost. The loss of language within a culture has the further effect of negative self-worth on the individual, poverty, failure of family systems, and limiting collective potential to solve problems (Horsethief, 2011, p. 1). Although many of the Ktunaxa’s traditional stories have been published (Andrews et al., 1997), there has been no Western scholarship connected to their traditional oral storytelling customs

The Canada Council for the Arts (2012) is one Canadian government agency that has recognized the fundamental importance of supporting Aboriginal language and the traditional knowledge that is embedded in Indigenous stories (p. 1). The legacy of the residential school system, migration between Aboriginal communities and cities, linguistic intermarriage, and the dominance of English and French in the overarching Canadian culture have all contributed to the erosion of Aboriginal languages; this loss has effect of diminishing access to traditional

knowledge embedded in stories told in these languages (Canada Council for the Arts, 2012, p. 6). Currently, it is expected that the next decade will mean the loss of the last generation of fluent speakers and the stories embedded in those languages (Canada Council for the Arts, 2012, p. 8).

### **Literature Review**

I undertook the task of understanding the worldview reflected in the Indigenist research framework as described by Shawn Wilson (2008), which describes how truth is co-constructed and emerges through ceremony. In order to approach this research with authenticity and respect, it was necessary that I understand what is meant by Aboriginal worldviews so that these understandings could inform my approach to research. This resulted in an actual paradigm shift in which I questioned and even altered my own assumptions, my understanding of Canadian history, and my own ways of knowing. In an email conversation, Christopher Horsethief referred to this shift, in which I straddled worldviews, as *epistemological hybridism*. As Wilson (2008), said, “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you haven’t done it right” (p. 135). The process of decolonization—recognizing the effects of and disengaging from colonial structures within the overarching Canadian society—and moving through this project has changed me profoundly.

Secondly, and as part of this process of decolonization, it was integral that I step out of the shadow of Western ontologies and theorists—including media ecologists Walter Ong (1982), Harold Innis (1947), and Eric Havelock (1980); all have written extensively on oral traditions and had greatly influenced my early interest in Indigenous orality. This was important because, as Archibald (2008) noted, applying western models of theory is an act of colonization and

diminish and represent the intelligence contained in Aboriginal stories (p. 15-16). Archibald's (2008) exploration of shared traditional knowledge through storytelling—what she referred to in the title as “storywork”—emphasized concerns about authority, voice, access, power, preservation, and representation related to the use of Indigenous oral history, and that all explorations of traditional story must be based in the culture from which they are derived.

Thirdly, I acquainted myself with research methodologies that respected the community with which I was working, making this an endeavor that recognized and embraced the relationships I was building as part of this project. To this point, the only research conducted on Ktunaxa legends used colonizing methodologies that contributed to the nation's *cultural entropy*, in which traditional knowledge of the Ktunaxa was extracted, appropriated, distributed to non-Aboriginal researchers, and ultimately given back to the nation in a decontextualized form that contributed to the destabilization of the existing Ktunaxa culture (C. Horsethief, personal communication, December 15, 2012). My research was intended as a corrective to this dearth in Indigenist research by offering to provide insight into the way the Ktunaxa people recover, reclaim, and reconnect to their traditional knowledge.

Once engaged in these concepts, I could more deeply understand the cultural significance of the Ktunaxa creation stories.

### **Understanding the Aboriginal Worldview**

Wilson (2007) described the Indigenist paradigm as one that both straddles and is separate from western research paradigms because it represents an entirely different worldview (p. 194). Ontologically, the Indigenist paradigm distinguishes itself by seeing reality as a complex set of relationships. Wilson's (2008) later work described the importance of

relationships in conducting Indigenous research—relationships between the researcher and those with whom the researcher is conducting their study, as well as relationships with ideas, animals, the land, and the universe. Wilson described nurturing these relationships—through respect, reciprocity, and responsibility—as a form of ceremony, and maintaining accountability in these relationships was central to the methods of data collection, understanding, and presentation of this project. Wilson (2008) rejected the notion that western paradigms could absorb the Indigenist research paradigm, arguing that to do so was in itself a form of colonization (p. 53). This is because one of the understandings of dominant Western research paradigms is that knowledge belongs to the researcher or the individual, whereas the Indigenist paradigm posits that “knowledge cannot be owned or discovered but is merely a set of relationships that may be given a visible form” (Wilson, 2008, p. 127). Wilson (2007) explained that the Indigenist paradigm must be seen as distinct from western research paradigms because it represents an entirely different worldview in which knowledge itself is relational and emergent (p. 194).

Similarly, Little Bear (2000) described Aboriginal philosophy as conceiving all of existence as energy in which all things are “imbued with spirit, and in constant motion” (p. 77). This notion of constant motion or flux is linked to a cyclical view of the world in which everything is interconnected—a worldview that emphasizes process over product (Little Bear, 2000, p. 78). Circular conceptions of time, a holistic understanding of experience, a non-hierarchical, shared-power concept of human relations, humans in a relationship of care, and responsibility are also attributes of Indigenous worldviews (Walker, 2004, p. 529).

These views are reflected in many Aboriginal languages, which are typically verb-rich and action oriented and describe happenings more readily than objects (Little Bear, 2000, p. 78).

Such language usage and thought also reduces dichotomies and binary conceptions that exist in many Western ontologies and language: there is no either/or, saint/sinner, heaven/hell, us/them, or animate/inanimate. As Little Bear (2000) noted, “If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations” (p. 78). This relational aspect of Aboriginal languages is a reminder that we are of the earth rather than on it, and reminds Aboriginal people of their responsibility to all objects, to all past, present, and future life, and to the universe itself.

A whole worldview is contained in the language structure and ways to relate to everything around you. Language is the backbone of culture. The centre of our being is within the element of language, and it’s the dimension in which our existence is most fully accomplished. We do not create a language, but are created within it. (Canada Council for the Arts, 2012, p. 11)

This context of Indigenous language and relational worldview helped to prepare me for the ceremony of storytelling with the Ktunaxa elders. The stories that were shared within our circle were reflective of the Indigenist paradigm in that they described a holistic view of all of existence—the earth, the animals, the territory in which we live, and the ancestors to whom we owe respect and gratitude.

### **Learning through stories**

Indigenous creation stories are spiritual stories, connecting the people to whom they belong to other people, plants, animals, the earth, and the universe (Grievés, 2008, p. 364). These stories are believed to come from creation ancestors who laid down the foundations for all of life—the laws of existence (Grievés, 2008, p. 364). Grievés (2008) said, “The Law ensures that



each person knows his or her relationships and responsibilities for other people (their kin), for country including water sources, landforms, and the species, and for the ongoing relationship with the ancestor spirits themselves” (p. 365). Hulan and Eigenbrod (2008) described First Nations oral traditions as a distinct way of knowing and the means by which knowledge is reproduced, preserved, and transferred from generation to generation—a key principle associated with the Indigenist paradigm. Again, I refer to Wilson (2008), who differentiates this approach from Western notions of epistemology that “force us to be separated, isolated individuals” (p. 137). The interconnectedness not only of humans to one another, past and present, but also to the spirit world, our own emotions, the elements that surround us, are part of the Indigenous epistemology that are conveyed by these stories.

Archibald (2008) characterized the importance of oral narratives as a means of describing and informing ethophilosophies, noting, “an Indigenous philosophical context for holism refers to the interrelatedness between the intellectual, spiritual (metaphysical values and beliefs and the Creator), emotional and physical (body and behaviour/action) realms to form a whole healthy person” (p. 11). Sharing stories is an important part of relationship building and sharing of knowledge in Aboriginal cultures, which reflect the belief systems and consciousness of Indigenous people (Archibald, 2008, p. 2, 25). Thus, storytelling is a dynamic, interactive engagement between the storyteller, the listener, and the culture through which these stories arise.

Archibald (2008) also emphasized the role that elders play in sharing this knowledge. Elders, as storytellers, have a responsibility to transmit understanding of the world to listeners. There is an exchange of energy between the storyteller and listener, said Archibald (2008), that

“challenges me to think, to examine my emotional reactions in relation to plot and characters, to question and reflect on my behaviours and future actions, and to appreciate a story’s connections to my spiritual nature” (p. 85). It is the elders’ immersion in Ktunaxa language, culture, and cultural stories that give them the recognition among the nation—the cultural equivalent of a Western PhD (V. McKendry, personal communication, April 28, 2013). The elders who were part of the Ktunaxa storytelling circle shared responsibility with the listener—the listener to seek knowledge through stories and the elder to provide those teachings. As part of the teaching, the elders would speak not only to the morals and how those related to Ktuanxa ways of life; they also shared how learning from these stories will reconnect younger Ktunaxa to their culture and help the nation decolonize individually and as a whole.

### **Decolonized methodologies**

The methodology of this project began with the previously described process of decolonization and the desire to approach the research as ceremony, as described by Wilson (2008). This began with developing relationships within the Ktunaxa Nation, building trust, and gaining an understanding of how this project would help serve the needs within the nation. Several members of the Ktunaxa—Melanie Sam, Joe Pierre, and Herman Alpine—shared with me a hope that the accompanying video would generate interest about Ktunaxa culture, language and stories, both within and beyond Ktunaxa communities. Developing a rapport with the participants in order to create a circle for storytelling was also an important aspect of this project.

Chilisa (2012) recommended postcolonial approaches to ethnographic research, and advocated for the postcolonial Indigenous paradigm in studies with Indigenous peoples (p. 162). Chilisa linked research with ethics, stating, “(v)alidity with a postcolonial critique framework

starts with a call for recognition of conceptual frameworks, theoretical frameworks, and data collection and reflection methods derived from the researched's frames of reference and Indigenous knowledge" (p. 171). Because relationships are integral to Indigenous research, Chilisa described postcolonial Indigenous interview methods—such as unstructured interviews and speaking circles—and postcolonial means of analyzing the collected data (p. 216). Like Chilisa, Smith (2012) focused on the important role data collection can play in facilitating the decolonization of Indigenous communities. Much of her research has involved travelling to visit other Indigenous peoples (Smith is Maori), and listening to their stories as a means of exploring their culture.

Kovach (2009) underlined the theoretical and epistemological approaches to Indigenous research methodologies, and examined the use of approaches between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to research with Aboriginal peoples. Kovach (2009) focused on the importance of storytelling as a method of sharing knowledge, the role of the researcher's interpretation in the creation of knowledge, and the importance of the ethnographer's self-awareness and self-reflection during the research process. In designing the methodology for this research, I drew upon Kovach's interpretation of the researcher's role in approaching Indigenous communities and traditional knowledge.

Smith (2012) referred to colonized Indigenous people as having a shared culture, and so deconstructing Western ideals of research constructs is a shared endeavour between Indigenous people and their researchers. This is critical particularly in conducting research with Aboriginal people who are still dealing with the trauma of colonization. Here, colonization is understood as the action and effects of dominant groups moving into and colonizing already inhabited

territories. The ongoing effects of colonization include oppression, control, and near elimination of pre-existing cultures.

This latter effect is apparent in the suppression of Aboriginal worldviews, which has been held by Western scholars to be inferior and not worthy of consideration (Smith, 2012, p. 49). Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies have been largely left out of academic conversations and, indeed, history itself (Smith, 2012, p. 50; Simpson, 2001, p. 139). Even the language with which Western society considers and renames the territories of Indigenous people in North America in order to proclaim ownership—*terra nullis*, for example—is evidence of the intended obliteration of Aboriginal worldviews and histories.

A decolonizing, postcolonial methodology does more than simply respect the worldview of Aboriginal worldviews—it also nourishes the field of knowledge itself. It provides greater understanding of the human experience that goes beyond mere empiricism and an individualistic notion of society and culture. The neglect of Aboriginal worldviews in favour of so-called Western ideologies has left the field of communication studies poorer, according to Rodriguez (2010), and “undercut liminality, hybridity, diversity, and most of all, possibility” (p. 118). This form of colonization speaks to the effects not just upon the land but also upon the mind, the spirit, and the body of the colonized being discursively controlled by others (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 122). Colonization, said Rodriguez (2010), “puts us in conflict with our selves”, which ultimately dehumanizes us (p. 123). Post-colonial approaches to research provide an emergent theory of infinite possibility, including the reunification of self and relationships to spirit, body, and all of existence that Western theories neglect (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 123).

The history of colonization also includes research that has been done on, but not with, Aboriginal peoples such as the Ktunaxa. This resulted in what Ktunaxa researcher Christopher Horsethief described as *cultural entropy*, in which traditional knowledge of the Ktunaxa was extracted, appropriated, distributed to non-Aboriginal researchers, and ultimately given back to the nation in a decontextualized form that contributed to the destabilization of the existing Ktunaxa culture (C. Horsethief, personal communication, December 15, 2012). Furthermore, those members of the community that provided information to researchers were not credited for the sharing of traditional knowledge. Therefore, the sharing of control is essential to the methodological framework of this research. As such, although confidentiality and the protection of identity are often important in ethnographic research, in this case, identifying the contributors to this project is necessary and desired by the community. Thus, all elders and storytellers from the nation who participated in this research, and who signed consent forms indicating their willingness, are credited for sharing their knowledge. Their names are included in this document's acknowledgements as well as on the accompanying video.

### **Research Design**

The traditional knowledge of the Ktunaxa, including the creation story, comes from an oral tradition. Therefore, a written account of the story would be inappropriate as a means of data collection and presentation. Data was collected primarily through a day-long videotaped storytelling circle with *K'itnumuç'titkçatka* (Ktunaxa elders) and *kaqatpatniy* (storytellers) representing four Ktunaxa communities. This event was hosted by the Ktunaxa Nation Council (KNC) on March 16, 2013 at the KNC government building in Cranbrook, B.C. The storytelling was facilitated by Joe Pierre and Melanie Sam, the KNC Director of Traditional Knowledge and

Language. As this research is situated in the Indigenist paradigm, my role was that of both observer and participant, such that I was learning from and engaging with the stories and the emergent truths and themes as they were communally revealed. Truth is experiential and co-created within the ceremony and ritual of storytelling, so my inclusion within the storytelling circle was integral to observations, data collection, and reflection. However, as a non-member of the community, I limited my participation to listening (and laughing). In the follow-up interviews with Herman Alpine and Marguerite Cooper, I facilitated discussions by asking open-ended questions that invited the elders to share the meanings within the stories.

Our circle included 17 Ktunaxa members—storytellers, elders, and listeners—plus myself. Many of these elders have memories associated with the ways in which the story used to be shared, including associated rituals, side narratives, and expectations. Elders are essential to learning these shared truths as part of the learner-teacher relationship. Archibald (2008) described researchers in traditional knowledge as having to be “culturally ready” to receive knowledge (p. 37). Within our circle, Herman Alpine was the elder who directed the lessons within the stories to my attention, sharing the meaning behind *Skinçuc̓*’s many manifestations and exploits.

Two video cameras were used to capture this event, and were situated around the outside of the storytelling circle in order to maximize viewing of all of the participants and yet not interfere with storytelling sightlines. Two students from Mount Baker Secondary School in Cranbrook—Joelle Winkel and Kris Babcock—filmed the event, indexed the collected video files, and edited the final product with my supervision. Field notes included observations, discussions, questions, post-storytelling impressions, and my reflections about a day that I found

tremendously moving. Additionally, post-interview follow-up discussions with Joe Pierre and elders Herman Alpine and Marguerite Cooper were held on April 22, 2013, to interpret data and provide any additional insights or information arising from the storytelling event. This collected data and reflections by Pierre, Alpine, and Cooper are included in the final video ethnography.

The analysis of the collected data was a collaborative effort between Joseph Pierre, Ktunaxa elders Herman Alpine and Marguerite Cooper, and myself. Smith (2012) described research through “imperial eyes” as an approach that conveyed innate superiority, “stealing” knowledge from one culture in a way to benefit that of the dominant culture (p. 58). This includes the “analysis of imperialism”, which draws upon Western theories as a way of decontextualizing traditional knowledge of Aboriginal peoples. Therefore, having those within the culture analyze the Ktunaxa stories’ foundational teachings was an integral piece of the final project.

The collected data for this project was analyzed using narrative and performance theories as they relate to the Indigenist paradigm. Hill’s (1997) research examined Indigenous storytelling and ways of knowing, and advocated for using performance theory as a way of exploring Aboriginal stories. Hill argued that performance theory as a lens through which to view Aboriginal stories allowed the researcher to move beyond more typical explorations of mythology, because in the oral storytelling traditions the culture is made and remade with the retelling of these foundational stories. Hill (1997) said that performance is how people negotiate cultural boundaries and, indeed, how culture remakes itself (para9). Archibald (2008) described the importance of the storyteller’s performance in sharing traditional stories, and noted that Aboriginal students reacted more to “performed” stories than those written down (p. 132). The

students described an engaging story as one in which the teller changed his or her voice in different tones, told the stories with expression and action, spoke with excitement, and described the events “as if they were real” (Archibald, 2008, p. 132).

Performance theory has been used to analyze the ways in which truth within the stories was shared and agreed upon by the storytellers and those in attendance—the synchronistic moment of performance by the storyteller and receiving the story by the listeners (Hill, 1997, p. 112). The storytellers cued the listeners that stories were beginning, attuning the listeners to the story, characters, themes, and morals. The responsibility for telling and receiving the stories and the lessons were shared by both storytellers and audience members, and in these moments of synergy, truth was agreed upon and culture was remade. For this analysis, I watched for verbal and visual cues and the way those within the circle interacted with each other as well as the story.

In addition to performance theory, narrative thematic analysis was used as a means of understanding the themes and worldviews within the Ktunaxa creation story. This method focuses on the content the stories, implying an inherent belief that meaning is revealed through language alone, particularly among multiple storytellers, in order to identify common elements (Koehler Reissman, 2004). Narrative analysis allows the researcher to listen to the stories and grasp the phenomenon within in a holistic way and understand the stories’ themes and meaning within the context of the culture (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007, p. 460).

As I mentioned earlier, the creation stories traditionally took several days to tell, so the stories shared in our circle are but a sampling of the Nation’s foundational narratives. However,



the stories and themes from our circle are consistent with those recorded by Andrews et al. (1997) in *Ktunaxa Legends*.

### **Research Reflections**

In the narrative analysis of the Ktunaxa stories, I noticed themes emerging from within the stories related to the Ktunaxa relationships with all creation as well as the ways in which characters within the stories acted and interacted with each other. In my observations, I was most keenly aware of the ways in which the stories were connected to the Ktunaxa's values or identity, and how the stories supported and informed the culture of the Ktunaxa. Many members of the storytelling circle would take time following a story to relate to the rest of the participants how these themes were enacted through the culture, whether through behaviour, beliefs, traditions, or ways in which we should give reverence to the animals and spirit world. Besides these stories and the lessons embedded within each, many of the participants also shared memories of how stories had been told during the times of residential schools—when children were punished for sharing their stories—as well as what the stories told the Ktunaxa of how certain practices were to be carried out, including burials, according to “the old ways” (A. Joseph, March 16, 2013, personal communication).

The most prominent themes that arose from the storytelling circle include learning from the animals, the character of Skincuç, stories of the land, the connection of stories to Ktunaxa identity, and the responsibility of humans. The video highlights some of these stories and follow-up interviews. Each of the sections below corresponds with the video's subtitles. I also mention impressions that are not apparent on the video.

**In the time before**

The beginning of the Ktunaxa creation story, told by Joe Pierre, opens the video. Joe describes the time before *ʔaqʔsmaknik* (people), in which all the Great Chiefs in the world prepare for the humans by saying what they will offer. The themes within this segment that reflect Ktunaxa cultural values include mutual honour and respect between humans and animals, sacrifice for the greater good (in this case, the community of living beings, including the grass, the trees, and the earth itself), and gratitude: “As long as the humans sing my song, say my prayers” (J. Pierre, 2013, *Origins of Culture*). This opening also demonstrates the relationship between all of existence—the spirit world, the living world, all of creation, and the agreement that there will be honour and connection between all.

Sitting to the right of Joe in the video is Ktunaxa elder Herman Alpine. Herman can be seen nodding along with Joe’s telling. Throughout the day of storytelling, many of the listeners would nod when important morals or truths were shared. In particular, the audience responded in this manner to themes of honour, sacrifice, and responsibility to relationships.

**Learning from animals**

This segment begins with elder Marguerite Cooper, who explains that in the stories, everyone looks out for one another, a lesson from the animals that starts with the creation story. The stories told in the circle mainly feature animals, all of whom display particular characteristics or traits that the Ktunaxa learn from directly and indirectly. The theme of sacrifice for the communal good arises again in the story told by Bonnie Harvey, when she tells of how the Thunderbird sacrificed its life so that the animal warriors who were stuck in the heavens could use the feathers to fly back to earth. Herman describes again how the Ktunaxa are

connected to the animals within their territory and how they learn from the character of each—that everyone has a job to do, and that there is value in hard work. Not included in this segment is a discussion with Herman where he describes how the Ktunaxa have learned from some animals how to keep to themselves, to be wary of outsiders—a comment that perhaps provides insight into the Nation’s language and the fact that it is an isolate. Finally in this section, we hear about Grandmother Frog, grandmother to all of the animals—a relationship model that is still evident within Ktunaxa territories where an elder often will be considered everyone’s grandmother.

We also see within this segment some signs of warmth toward the characters within the stories—many of the participants laugh in appreciation at the characters. Bonnie’s embodiment of the animals trapped in the sky also gives evidence of the character traits of the animals; she describes the “big belly” of one of the characters, giving the impression of a large, gregarious character.

### **Dancing with Skinkuꞥ**

Skinkuꞥ (Coyote) was the star of the show during this day of storytelling. He is also a character that has evolved with Ktunaxa realities; Peter Williams’s story places Skinkuꞥ in a more modern setting—wearing contemporary clothes, carrying money that he keeps under his pillow and in his pockets, and travelling into town to buy food.

As Herman described it, Skinkuꞥ stories always start with, “Skinkuꞥ was going along . . .” This is a familiar cue to the Ktunaxa, and one that lets them know that a lesson is about to be shared. Skinkuꞥ’s character is well defined: he looks a bit scruffy like he’s had a bit of a scrap (and usually he has), he never takes responsibility for anything, his ego is larger than is likely

warranted, he's constantly breaking the rules or not following instructions, and his actions cause others to suffer. This last point is significant, as it runs counter to the other animals who will suffer themselves for the communal good. However, he is always punished for his ill deeds as well, because there are consequences for one's actions. So, it is often taken as a warning to be told that one is "acting like Skinkuꞥ". Skinkuꞥ can embody other characteristics as well, including heroism. In a conversation off-camera, Herman told me that Skinkuꞥ represents everyone one will meet in life—the good, the bad, and the very bad—and therefore there are lessons in Skinkuꞥ of what to look for and how to react to these people. There are many legends in which Skinkuꞥ plays the hero rather than the clown. Indeed, Herman shared a valuable lesson from Skinkuꞥ—how to survive in dark times.

In spite of his flaws, there is also great affection for Skinkuꞥ: each story that began with "Skinkuꞥ was going along" was greeted with smiles and laughter, and a general "settling in" for the story. In Peter's Skinkuꞥ storytelling, like Bonnie's, we get a physical sense of how Skinkuꞥ is perceived—a somewhat clownish and likeable character, regardless of his actions.

### **I didn't know I was Indian**

This segment deals with the effects of the residential school system, when the Ktunaxa's stories and language could not openly be shared, resulting in cultural trauma. It opens with Joe describing how the *ʔaqʔsmaknik* came to be—that the Aboriginal people were made of blood and grass, and that they would be small in number but powerful. (In a discussion not shown on the video, Alfred Joseph said that in the telling he was familiar with, the people of blood and grass were the Ktunaxa people.) These are personal stories of loss and disconnection to culture, and I feel that the people in the circle speak this better than I could. What is significant to me are two

things: that Herman describes this time of struggle, of surviving attempts at assimilation and annihilation, as a period when the Ktunaxa patterned themselves after the wolf and, in echoes of the creation story, sing its songs and say its prayers as a means of calling that power to themselves; and, secondly, that Herman underlines the importance of telling these stories as a means of reclaiming culture, of knowing what it means to be Ktunaxa.

The sharing of these personal stories changed the dynamics within the circle. The voices were quieter, faces more solemn. Those not sharing the stories nodded, showing understanding.

### **The people belong to the land**

The final clip is the conclusion of the creation story. It hints at what much of the creation story explains—how the Ktunaxa territory was formed during a great struggle between the *yawu?nik*, a giant, destructive water monster that was breaking the rules of creation, and *Na?muq?in*, the giant. Not included in this clip are how many landmarks within the Ktunaxa territory are named for what happened there; Herman explained to me that places are named for happenings and “not for ourselves”. The story is an oral map of the territory, describing the boundaries of the Ktunaxa territory and the geographical features within. An interesting note about this particular part of the story is the awareness of different *?aq?smaknik* upon the land: the white, black, yellow, and red races of people. This is an indication of the evolution of the Ktunaxa stories, and how they have taken into account the realities of a post-contact world. (In other legends, such as Bonnie’s story of how *?akinmi* [Mount Baker] was formed, all of the animals of the world involved in the war include African animals like the elephant.) The story ends with the responsibility of the *?aq?smaknik*: they must care for the land, the water, and all of the living beings upon it. Their connection to creation is inviolate.

### Conclusion

It has been almost two months since I sat in circle with the Ktunaxa elders and storytellers, and the feeling of wonder over what transpired that day has not waned. I remember feeling so fortunate to be welcomed into that circle to hear stories that have been shared among the Ktunaxa for thousands of years, and to learn the lessons within those stories. I am not Ktunaxa, not immersed in that culture, and my observations are those of an outsider. However, the lessons that were shared with me by Herman, Marguerite, and Joe were echoed in the stories themes—themes that have commonalities with Aboriginal worldviews but are distinctly Ktunaxa. We must care for the collective, and be willing to sacrifice ourselves for the greater good. We all have important work to do that should be respected, and we respect ourselves by working hard. We will meet Skincuc̓ again and again, or people just like him, and there are lessons to be learned. Be aware, and be wary. Look after your people, for they are all family. We have an obligation to the earth, to the animals, and to all of the living beings that have prepared the way for us. They will lend us their spiritual strength in dark times if we honour them.

Herman told me that he spent many years living as an “urban Indian” and that for most of his adult life, he didn’t know what it meant to be Ktunaxa (H. Alpine, personal communication, April 29, 2013). It wasn’t until he returned to his territory, spoke his language, and learned his stories that he understood who he was and who his people are. He looks to the wolf for guidance, which the Ktunaxa see as a very powerful warrior and a symbol of what has happened to his people, and encourages the younger generation to follow the traditional ways as a way of decolonizing themselves and preserving the culture.

Today, (the wolf's) life is in danger because the government decided they were going to put a bounty on them. It's sad that has to happen because for my people, the character of the wolf is very high. In times of struggle, we sing our songs to the power of the wolf for us to be able to get through. (H. Alpine, 2013, *Origins of Culture*, [21:29])

The work of personal decolonization combined with this brief glimpse into the culture of the Ktunaxa left me with feelings of appreciation, gratitude, and great sadness. I am sad for the trauma that Canadian policies of genocide, assimilation, and casual and official racism have brought to the Ktunaxa and all Aboriginal Peoples. When I began this work, I asked, “Who was I to do research among people who were not my own, among people who have been researched almost to death by *suyapis*<sup>2</sup> like me?” And the answer came from people like Melanie Sam, Joe Pierre, Bonnie Harvey, Anna Natanik, and Christopher Horsethief: I am Tanya—ally and friend.

Through the storywork with the Nation, I've acquired a deeper connection to this territory. I look at mountains, valleys, and rivers with new eyes, seeing them as they've been seen for thousands of years. I feel a sense of timelessness that sometimes takes my breath away when I sit still in the land of the Ktunaxa and gaze at horizons they have seen since time immemorial, or when I consider the character of the flora and fauna native to this land and what they have to teach me, or when I have the good fortune to hear to Skinkuç's songs during a full moon.

I am grateful every day for the trust that has been given me by the people from the Nation, which tells me so much about their own resilience, strength, and attitude toward an open heart. I have been invited by my friends—Bonnie, Anna, Joe, and Melanie—to attend and

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<sup>2</sup> White people.

participate in community events. I have been welcomed and delighted every time someone within the community takes time to tell me something about the Ktunaxa culture. Plus, I've acquired a very elementary understanding of a few Ktunaxa words. I am delighted each time I recognize a word.

Herman hopes that the next generation will learn their stories and the language, and sing the songs of their animal brethren, before the culture of the Ktunaxa disappears and people forget the teachings that all things are related on this earth. I hope this, too, and I hope that this written document and video will provide some support for that endeavour. It was my hope and the hope of the Nation that in exploring these stories, we might learn more about what it means to be Ktunaxa and re-remember the teachings of the Ktunaxa ancestors. There still is so much more room for exploration and discovery, and I look forward to that journey with the Ktunaxa, if they will allow me. There is a world of knowledge within this Nation, and, without it, we could all be lost.



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