

If This Is Your Land,  
Where Are Your Stories?

*Finding Common Ground*

J. EDWARD CHAMBERLIN



VINTAGE CANADA

Praise for  
IF THIS IS YOUR LAND, WHERE ARE YOUR STORIES?

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“One of the most interesting non-fiction books of the year.”

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—Wade Davis, author of *Light at the Edge of the World*

“This new book places us in the middle of the stories of indigenous

peoples—from Canada to Africa to Australia—about themselves  
and the world. Chamberlin has become our literary bard through  
which these people are able to speak in their own voices. An  
extraordinary achievement, one made once in a generation.

It is not only a book that all must read but, more  
importantly, one that we all must listen to.”

—Sander L. Gilman, author of *Jewish Frontiers:  
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“Explores the idea of home through storytelling.  
This enthralling book touches on religion, nationalism,  
literature and mythology.”

—*The Vancouver Sun*

IF THIS IS YOUR LAND,

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# Introduction

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IT HAPPENED AT A MEETING between an Indian community in northwest British Columbia and some government officials. The officials claimed the land for the government. The natives were astonished by the claim. They couldn't understand what these relative newcomers were talking about. Finally one of the elders put what was bothering them in the form of a question. "If this is your land," he asked, "where are your stories?" He spoke in English, but then he moved into Gitksan, the Tsimshian language of his people—and told a story.

All of a sudden everyone understood ... even though the government foresters didn't know a word of Gitksan, and neither did some of his Gitksan companions. But what they understood was more important: how stories give meaning and value to the places we call home; how they bring us close to the world we live in by taking us into a world of words; how they hold us together and at the same time keep us apart. They also understood the importance of the Gitksan language, especially to those who do not speak it.

The language sounded strange; it made no sense to most of the people there. But its strangeness was somehow comforting, for it reminded them that stories always have something strange about them, and that this is what first takes hold of us, making us believe. Recognizing the strangeness in other people's stories, we see and hear it in our own.

Other people's stories are as varied as the landscapes and languages of the world; and the storytelling traditions to which they belong tell the different truths of religion and science, of history and the arts. They tell people where they came from, and why they are here; how to live, and sometimes how to die. They come in many different forms, from creation stories to constitutions, from southern epics and northern sagas to native American tales and African praise songs, and from nursery rhymes and national anthems to myths and mathematics.

And they are all ceremonies of belief as much as they are chronicles of events, even the stories that claim to be absolutely true. We first learn this when we are very young; which is to say, we learn how to believe before we learn what to believe. It is what we believe—the second stage—that is at the heart of many of our current conflicts. We love and hate because of our beliefs; we make homes for ourselves and drive others out, saying that we have been here forever or were sent because of a vision of goodness or gold, or instructions from our gods; we go wandering, and we go to war. Whether Jew or Arab, Catholic or Protestant, farmer or hunter, black or white, man or woman, we all have stories that hold us in thrall and hold others at bay. What we share is the practice of believing, which we become adept at very early in our lives; and it is this practice that generates the power of stories.

We need to go back to the beginning. We all want to believe. We all *need* to believe. Every parent, every farmer, every builder, every cook knows this. We have to believe that the child will grow, or spring will come, or that the house will take shape, or the bread will rise. Stories and songs give us a way to believe, and ceremonies sustain our faith.

They also give us things to believe, which is a mixed blessing. The reality of our lives

inseparable from the ways in which we imagine it, and this closeness sometimes produces conflict and confusion. But it also produces some of our most durable myths, whose contradictory character seems to be part of being human and is certainly part of all cultures. The contradiction is inseparable from the nature of belief and the dynamics of believing, which always involve an element of strangeness and surprise.

Every story brings the imagination and reality together in moments of what we might well call faith. Stories give us a way to wonder how totalitarian states arise, or why cancer cells behave the way they do, or what causes people to live in the streets ... and then come back again in a circle to the wonder of a song ... or a supernova ... or DNA. Wonder and wondering are closely related, and stories teach us that we cannot choose between them. If we try, we end up with the kind of amazement that is satisfied with the first explanation, or the kind of curiosity that is incapable of genuine surprise. Stories make the world more real, more rational, by bringing us closer to the irrational mystery at its centre. Why did my friend get sick and die? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Whose land is this we live on? How much is enough?


And where is home? Home may be where we hang our hat, or where our heart is ... which may be the same place, or maybe not. It may be where we choose to live ... or where we belong, whether we like it or not. It may be all of these things or none of them. Whatever and wherever it is, home is always border country, a place that separates and connects us, a place of possibility for both peace and perilous conflict.

Except for the idea of a creator, there is no idea quite as bewildering as the idea of home, nor one that causes as many conflicts. It is a nest of contradictions. The late-twentieth-century image of the global village seemed to sound the death knell for home as a particular place, much as an earlier generation claimed to do for religion when they said God was dead. But the report of His death was an exaggeration (as Mark Twain once said when he read his own obituary in a newspaper); and so it is too with the idea of home. God has certainly not disappeared from the scene, and nor has Allah; the world seems to be getting larger, not smaller; and home is becoming more important, not less.

Can one land ever really be home to more than one people? To native and newcomer, for instance? Or to Arab and Jew, Hutu and Tutsi, Albanian and Kosovar, Turk and Kurd? Can the world ever be home to all of us? I think so. But not until we have reimagined Them as Us.



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PART 1 

## *Them and Us*

## *Babblers*



I'LL BEGIN WITH BABBLING and doodling. We all begin there, after all. As we grow up, we grow out of the habit—or so we think. In fact, what we do is learn to dismiss others who haven't grown up exactly like us as incorrigible babblers and doodlers. And eventually the distinction becomes one of the ways we divide the world into Them and Us. There are those who doodle and do nothing. That's usually Them. And there are those who work, doing worthwhile things. Like Us. There are those who speak properly, again like Us; and those who babble more or less meaninglessly, as They do.

By the meaningless sign linked to the meaningless sound we have built the shape and meaning of the world, said Marshall McLuhan. He was talking about how we represent ideas and things, which is another way of saying he was talking about babbling and doodling. Building shape and meaning is what we do in our stories and songs. They are built on the arbitrariness of words and images, which is to say they are built on sand; but they are rock solid as long as we believe in them. And that belief is founded on a sense of ceremony, a ceremony of shared belief. Such ceremonies often seem silly to those who don't grow up with them.

Table manners, for instance. I remember my early lessons in table manners. They seemed to me to give new meaning to meaninglessness. One day it was sitting up straight, which was I thought, a waste of a well-made chair; another it was taking the piece closest to you when the plate was passed, which was stupid if you wanted a different piece. Then it was eating peas with a fork. My parents tried to convince me that mastering this skill would improve not only my current position but also my future prospects. I wasn't persuaded. Fingers were better. But since I was learning all about arbitrariness, I had an idea. I had seen Mary Kozak, the Ukrainian lady who came once a week to help my mother, eat her peas with a knife. That was even harder than eating them with a fork. So I thought I would try that at the dinner table. I sat up straighter than ever, spooned the portion of peas closest to me from the serving plate, and went to work with my knife. My father was not impressed. My mother said it was bad manners. I was ready. "But Mary Kozak eats that way," I replied.

Silence. My parents loved Mary Kozak, and I was counting on the fact that they wouldn't say anything disrespectful of her. But eating peas with a knife seemed to them sort of ... well, "barbaric" would be a good word. Having failed the first time, I tried once again to balance the peas. Then, just as I thought I was winning the battle, my father said, "Learn to speak Ukrainian and you can eat peas with a knife."

Ukrainian seemed strange to me, and when I tried to speak it I sounded as if I were just babbling. It took me a while to realize that it was the verbal equivalent of eating peas with a knife. A ceremony, but someone else's.

When Europeans first arrived in southern Africa hundreds of years ago, the first people they met when they moved inland made strange noises. The newcomers reported that they sounded like animals. Their descriptions do not coincide with what we know of Bushman speech, with its wide range of clicks and tones; and in fact, they were almost certainly yodelling, something the Bushmen did quite well. They were welcoming the strangers with music.

We can sympathize with the settlers, perhaps. It must have been like being greeted by bagpipes if you've never heard them. Most of us are not very good at listening to yodelling either, even though some musicologists say that music begins with the yodel, since the singing voice carries farther than speech. Still, to the settlers it sounded barbaric.

The word "barbaric" was first coined by the Greeks to describe the Persians, because they didn't speak Greek. They seemed to stammer when they spoke, sounding bar-bar-ic. They also looked different, behaved oddly, and their ceremonies were strange. They weren't necessarily uncivilized; they just weren't Greek.

Since then we have got into the habit of sharpening that distinction and dividing the whole world into the civilized and the barbaric, Us and Them, Somebodies and Nobodies. The Gitksan elder who asked, "If this is your land, where are your stories?" eventually had to go to court to try to convince the rest of us that the territory where his people had lived for thousands of years was his home. The case was called *Delgamuukw*, after one of the other elders (Earl Muldoe) who joined him in the suit; and during more than a year of testimony the Gitksan told their stories and sang their songs. But at the end of the day they didn't convince the judge, whose name was Allan McEachern, of anything other than their barbaric behaviour. Since the Gitksan ancestors had "no horses, no wheeled vehicles, no written literature," the judge said, they were "unorganized societies"—that was the legal phrase—"roaming from place to place like beasts of the field." Not "people" in what his nineteenth-century predecessors used to call "the true sense of the word." Nobodies.

In Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, when Huck was asked by Aunt Sally whether anybody had been hurt by the explosion on the Mississippi riverboat, he replied, "No'm. Killed a nigger." "Well, it's lucky," said Aunt Sally, "because sometimes people do get hurt." It seems that other people—people who don't write things down like we do, or speak like we do, or look like we do, or behave like we do, or work the land with horses and tractors like we do—can't get hurt. This was a tough bit of news for the Gitksan who understandably claimed to have been quite severely injured when a whole bunch of people, looking a lot like me, came and settled on their land.

The settlers who arrived at the Cape of Good Hope were like that judge. They weren't sure the Bushmen were human at all, and they certainly didn't think the Bushmen could be hurt. Indeed, many settlers in the various "new" worlds to which they have wandered over the past millennia have had the same doubts. The Europeans who came to the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for example, saw in the aboriginal people they met the social instincts of a more or less advanced herd of animals. Interestingly, there is evidence that *both* sides wondered about the other along much the same lines. Native people were just as astonished at the strangeness of the newcomers, and their stories tell of their uncertainty about just where *they* belonged in the great chain of being. So the misunderstanding world

both ways. Each side thought the other did much worse than eat peas with a knife.

The natives had a lot of experience with strangers, and quite quickly figured out both the manners and the motives of this bunch. On the other side, the settlers began to wonder about their first impressions of the natives. Maybe they were not seeing what was right before their eyes. Maybe these native societies were more advanced, more human, than they first appeared. In the early 1500s a celebrated disagreement broke out, involving the fundamental question of whether the so-called New World people, misnamed “Indians,” were to be considered human; whether their morals were those of a civilized society or barbaric; and—this was the crux of the matter for the settlers—whether their dispossession and enslavement were justifiable.

The dispute culminated in a formal debate held in Valladolid, Spain, between 1550 and 1551. At this distance it all seems rather legalistic, for it turned around a distinction between just and unjust “title,” the sort of thing you would expect a lawyer to check before you bought a piece of property—which, of course, was exactly what the settlers were doing. Slaves were just as much property as land was, and often worth more. The character of the Spanish settlers’ title to them was based on religious classification—specifically, whether they were Roman Catholic or not—and on whether they were won in a “just” war or were “properly” purchased.

The arbitrariness, or what Marshall McLuhan might call the meaninglessness, of all this should not be lost on us. These were some of the most learned scholars in Europe at the time. This was the Renaissance, after all, when learning was highly prized, and they were arguing about whether to believe such ... well, such nonsense. Juan Gines de Sepulveda, a distinguished translator of Aristotle and the official historian for the Spanish court, argued that there was just cause in the Spanish conquest of the aboriginal inhabitants of the New World. The Indians were incapable of orderly living, he asserted, being disobedient by nature; they should therefore be subjected to rule, including enslavement. On the other side was Bartolomé de Las Casas, a settler and sometime priest, who insisted that the Indians were human and rational, and that their societies were highly developed, internally coherent, and continuously sustained by a set of habits and values to which all members of society adhered. Their enslavement, therefore, was unjustifiable.

National and international pressures overtook the disputants, and the essential issue of title to property—in this case, land and labour—remained unresolved. So did the question of where to draw the line between the barbaric and the civilized, and between the human and the non-human. We might think that these categories would have faded away, but no such luck. These days, they are routinely invoked to justify both terrorist acts and actions against terrorists; indeed, the category of terrorism itself is premised on a conviction that the world is divided into Them and Us. In saying “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,” George W. Bush drew an old line in the sand. When 1960s demonstrators called police “pigs,” or the old Chinese communist warriors talked about the “running dogs” of imperialism, each side was questioning the humanity of the other.

Let’s go back and see if we can understand why. Human beings are often defined as animals who have language; so it is not surprising that the categories of the barbaric and the civilized first take shape along lines of language with the dismissal of a different language as either

barbaric or so basic that it could not possibly accommodate civilized thoughts and feelings.

Sometimes, of course, the strangeness of a different language is taken to be an affirmation of *special* meaning and value, rather than of none at all. That's the connection between Ukrainian and table manners. We meet this often in the strangeness of sacred words, which many of us hold dear even though they may make little sense, at least in any ordinary way. From the sixth-century Arabic of the Qu'ran to the medieval Latin of the Roman Catholic liturgy, and from the ancient Hebrew of the Torah to the seventeenth-century English of the King James translation of the Bible, millions of people worship in languages they do not speak.

Here's a different example from an Aboriginal elder in Australia, greeting strangers the way the Bushmen did—with strangeness. "I tell'im, you don't belonga this country! You got no *tulkul Tjukurrpal* Only I got'em *tulku*. We bin live along this country. We know this country. You don't know where you come from. You not boss for this place!" The speaker was Charlie Tjungurrayi, and the issues he raised were clear, even though the two Pintupi words that conveyed them—*tulku* and *tjukurrpa*—were not.

*Tulku* and *tjukurrpa* translate roughly as "song" and "dreaming," and together they represent all that is most significant about the relationship between aboriginal people and the land, between their past and the present, and between one and another. They are the beginning of an answer to the question "If this is your land, where are your stories?"

But Charlie Tjungurrayi did not translate them. What turned out to be most important about those two words was not their roughly translated meaning but the fact that they could not be translated. There's an old Italian pun on *traduttore* and *traditore*. The first means "translator;" the second "traitor."

Untranslatability is an ancient value, and one that my parents called upon when I tried to eat my peas with a knife. The Greek philosopher Plato once said that if we change the form of story and song—he was especially concerned about music, but could have been talking about language—we change something fundamental in the moral and political constitution of a society. That's why he didn't want to change or translate them; and that's why others do.

For different languages and strange beliefs create conflict; and even if we avoid the conflict, they certainly encourage misunderstanding. Many Canadians, committed as they are to a bilingual country, have nonetheless made a career out of misunderstanding French and English (perhaps in order to avoid such conflicts); and although there are many countries dedicated to linguistic diversity, from Switzerland (with four national languages) to South Africa (with eleven), nobody claims it is easy. And the fault lines can be fatal, as Canada keeps being reminded.

Shouldn't we be trying to find common ground across cultures in language itself? In the Middle Ages, when you learned a language, people used the Latin word *habitus*, which means you had the habit of it. Doesn't this suggest the obvious way to reconcile these conflicts: make sure everyone has the same habits, that they all speak in a certain way, behave in a certain way, believe in a certain way?

For all their political incorrectnesses, these are tough questions to answer. Why should language be an element of conflict when there is such a simple solution? One of the great

stories across many cultures has to do with the proliferation of languages in the Tower of Babel, and the promise of a day when rivalries will be erased and conflicts eliminated in a common language. One problem, of course, is *which* language. The names of many aboriginal languages mean “the language,” the one that anyone who wants to be civilized should speak, just as the names of many native nations—the Inuit (still called Eskimo in the United States) for example, or the Dene (who live from the northern tundra to the American southwest)—mean “the people.” Not just any language, or any people; *the* language, and *the* people.

Language is the signature of both individual and collective identity, and even small differences of accent identify speakers of a community or a country. To give up these differences would be to give up something that seems essentially human, and that helps us understand who we are and where we belong. This cuts both ways. Those who do not speak a language, or do not speak it “properly,” are made less certain of their identity by those who do. The Gitksan men and women who don’t speak Gitksan are sometimes made to feel a little less like people (in the true sense of the word, of course). And yet language is the stuff of stories and songs, and we want them to be different. Strangeness and surprise are important to stories, and what could be stranger or more surprising than another language?

Let’s come at this from a different direction. If diversity of languages is analogous to diversity of species, surely different languages should be nourished the way rare species are by protecting their habitat. Doing this would mean protecting the land and the livelihood of the people who speak such languages. Languages spoken by only a few, like small pieces of land, would be just as precious as large ones; they would be like sacred sites. And while our limited success with all but a few endangered species might make us wonder about the practicality of this approach, isn’t the principle of diversity a good one?

If we present the issue along evolutionary lines we come up with somewhat different questions. For instance, why should a particular language be preserved when another larger or stronger one seems ready to replace it? There are a goodly number of endangered languages around the world, and that’s sad; but the age of the few remaining speakers and the generation gaps in their communities would suggest that English or Mandarin or Hindi or Turkish or one of the other dozen or so most widely spoken languages on the planet is going to take over sooner or later anyway, so why not now? Why not let things take their natural course and encourage the survival of the fittest language? What would be lost, other than a few species? Admittedly, there aren’t that many species of languages, but there are lots of varieties, or dialects, within each family; and some of them, in a nice Darwinian flourish, might eventually become new species if the conditions were right.

The trouble is that the “right” conditions are often the product of force ... as, of course, are the wrong conditions. The language that wins out is sometimes the one with the army. And we know that while some languages survive all sorts of violence, some do not. And others just slip away, less counted than spotted owls.

It all comes down to a simple question: why does it matter? One answer is that different languages may generate meaning differently, in which case what we are talking about are different ways of being in the world, different ways of being human—the barbaric way and the civilized way, a cynic might say. But we know that these are arbitrary categories, that there is no such thing as the barbaric and the civilized. Don’t we?

The idea that we live our lives in language, and that we understand the world differently because we speak different languages, goes back a long way. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was widely promoted. Gottfried Leibniz, who was the co-inventor of calculus, argued (in an essay on the improvement of the German language) that language was a fundamental determinant of thought and behaviour. By the late eighteenth century the idea had strong support from philosophers and critics and even poets. William Wordsworth, for example, came to the conclusion that language is “the incarnation of thought ... not what thought is to the body but what the body is to the soul;” while Samuel Taylor Coleridge, his friend and collaborator, took the other side of the argument and called language merely an instrument of thought, like a mathematician’s slide rule.

For most of the twentieth century, the question was put by anthropologists like Franz Boas who worked mostly on the northwest coast of North America. Boas startled some of his colleagues by insisting that learning indigenous languages was fundamental to their work. The earlier generation, represented by James Frazer (of *Golden Bough* fame), had stayed on the verandah writing English and reading Greek. But then linguists such as Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf presented a detailed illustration of how languages shape not only our perception of things but the way we think and feel, determining the categories according to which we understand the world. This principle was given wide currency by Samuel Hayakawa in a popular mid-century book called *Language in Action*, and then made into a contemporary catchphrase by Marshall McLuhan: “The medium is the message.”

Eventually, the notion that different languages shape different thoughts and feelings and even different forms of behaviour was given a modern scientific tag and called “linguistic relativity.” Along with the postmodern enthusiasm for uncertainty and indeterminacy, it influenced postcolonial perspectives on the languages of colonized peoples. But long before both postmodernism and postcolonialism, it influenced my father when he said that I could eat my peas with a knife if I learned to speak Ukrainian.

The real impact of this line of thinking was negative, unfortunately, born of a conviction that aboriginal people should be taught European languages because their barbaric languages inhibited them from thinking and feeling in certain—which is to say, in civilized—ways. If one could change their language, it was argued, one could alter the way they thought and felt, changing them from childlike babblers and doodlers into adult citizens of a civil society. “Teaching an Indian youth in his own barbarous dialect is a positive detriment to him. The impracticability, if not impossibility, of civilizing the Indians of this country in any other tongue than our own would seem obvious,” said the United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs in his annual report in 1887. Seeing language as the key to cognitive and cultural change turned out to be both the highest tribute to its power and the grimmest form of social engineering.

There were other conflicts that also came to the fore. One of the most stubborn had to do with babbling barbarians and the written languages of civilized people. We heard the judge dismiss the Gitksan because they had no written literature. Sometimes this dismissal takes a more polite, but no less pernicious, turn. Societies whose major forms of imaginative expression are in speech and performance are classified as oral cultures. Then they are praised for their naturalness and naïveté, while the rest of us lament the ways in which the

sophistications of civilization have moved us away from a supposed oneness with the world which these simple spoken languages represent, into the abstraction and alienation that come with the written word. Speaking and listening are simple and natural, we say; while writing and reading are cultivated and complex. We wonder how people in these oral cultures recall things so clearly and how they reflect on ideas without the benefit of writing; and then we decide they really don't, they merely remember formulae. Just like scientists, say a few dissenters ... though we don't pay much attention to them, for after all these societies are "pre-scientific." So we celebrate their primitive consciousness, the kind that children display and we remark on how it is resonant with an openness to experience that the rest of us lose as the prison house of written language closes in upon us. But we also know—and here we brighten up a bit—that with this new phase of our lives comes the compensation of self-reflexive intelligence, the intelligence capable of real thought. Our kind of thought. Modern thought.

It has become almost a truism that writing—alphabetic writing in particular—marked an evolutionary advance. Writing frees the mind for original, abstract thought, the argument goes, while oral cultures are imprisoned in the present, uninterested in definitions, unable to make analytic distinctions and incapable of genuine self-consciousness. Oral cultures understand the world in magical rather than scientific terms, and those in such cultures who have any acquaintance whatsoever with writing are agonizingly aware of what they are missing.

This kind of thinking—if we can call it that—encourages people to treat other societies with a blend of condescension and contempt while celebrating the sophistication of their own. And it entrenches the misconception that there *are* such things as "oral cultures" and "written cultures." Think about it. All so-called oral cultures are rich in forms of writing—albeit non-syllabic and non-alphabetic ones: woven and beaded belts and blankets, knotted and coloured strings, carved and painted trays, poles, doors, verandah posts, canes and sticks, masks, hats and chests play a central role in the cultural and constitutional life of these communities, functioning in all the ways written texts do for European societies. And, on the other hand, the central institutions of our supposedly "written" cultures—our courts and churches and parliaments and schools—are in fact arenas of strictly defined and highly formalized oral traditions, in which certain things must be said and done in the right order by the right people on the right occasions with the right people present. We are, all of us, much more involved in both oral and written traditions than we might think. And our stories and songs draw on the resources of both.

Still, the misunderstanding continues to cause problems. Let's return for a moment to the Gitksan. When they went to court to assert their claims to their aboriginal territory, they told the history of their people with all the ritual it required, for the stories and songs that represent their past—*ada'ox*, they call them—are about belief. On one occasion another elder, Antgulilibix (Mary Johnson), was telling her *ada'ox* to the court. At a certain point, she said that she must now sing a song. Judge McEachern was appalled; the request seemed to him to flaunt the decorum of his courtroom. He tried to explain how uncomfortable he felt at having someone sing in his court; he said it made him feel judicially embarrassed, sort of like my parents watching me eat peas with a knife. He tried to make the plaintiffs understand that this was unlikely to get him any nearer the truth that he was seeking. He asked the lawyer



for the Gitksan whether it might not be sufficient just to have the words written down, and avoid the performance. Finally, he agreed to let Mary Johnson sing her song; but as she was about to start he fired his final salvo. "It's not going to do any good to sing it to me," he said. "I have a tin ear."

It was a stupid thing to say, for he wasn't the least bit interested in the song or its music anyway. But it also was a smart thing to say; for he *did have* a tin ear, and he couldn't have heard the music even if he *were* interested in it. Most of us go through life assuming that we could make not only music but meaning out of Mary Johnson's song. It is like assuming we can translate *tulku* and *tjukurpa*. For the Mary Johnsons of the world, it is a sinister assumption. It is an assumption that understanding sophisticated oral traditions comes naturally to the sympathetic ear. It doesn't. Just as we learn how to read, so we learn how to listen; and this learning does not come naturally.

Belligerent conservatives ask better questions than sympathetic liberals; that's why I am interested in the judge and his tin ear and his tendentious "Why not just write it down?" He said something else as he dismissed the case. He said he believed Mary Johnson, but not her *ada'ox*. Another stupid statement. Certainly none of *us* would have said it. But it picks up a central question: Do we believe the singer or the song, the teller or the tale? Far from being the product of twentieth-century judicial arrogance, this question reflects an ancient uncertainty that is at the heart of many great traditions of pronouncement and performance in religion and politics and law.

It is impossible to expect that we will either educate our imaginations in a very wide range of different languages and different cultures, or else defer to them. We cannot always do that, nor do we necessarily want to. We want to be able to say "That rings false" on certain occasions without being called up short like the judge for our ignorance or our stupidity. We may sympathize with his predicament, but we don't want to exercise his bad judgment. At the same time, we want our believing to do justice to our *own* traditions of belief. We need a new way of looking at stories and songs that balances the artifice of their conventions with the naturalness—or the truth—of their representation of the world.

A few years ago, the hereditary chief of the Cayuga proposed telling the cycle of stories and songs of his people—the Great Law of the Haudenosaunee—in English. He was the custodian of this most important of Iroquois oral traditions, which it had taken him a lifetime to learn; but fewer than thirty people understood it when he told it in Cayuga. So he wanted to tell it in a language understood by the younger generation. Many of the other elders were adamantly opposed; but he did it anyway.

What should he have done? His intentions were certainly honourable; but all cultures—including our own—have protocols governing ceremonies, and why shouldn't he respect his? Was he being a traitor by translating, to recall that Italian pun? Many Christians insist that only priests can prepare the sacrament for communion. Judges must pronounce sentence, in a language of high formality. We use words out of another time and place, and sometimes out of another language, for some of our most important rituals—baptisms, weddings, funeral initiations, excommunications, coronations. And many of us would feel the ceremony had not really taken place—that what was said and done was "untrue," or treacherous—were those precise words not uttered on those occasions by those people.

Was the Cayuga chief a cultural vandal or a cultural hero? Was the Great Law true when told in another tongue? Are there gradations of truth? If so, what does that imply? Is a poem spoken aloud by the poet “truer” than one read silently by me? The implications of this could be very disconcerting ... and rather surprising to many people who have never entertained any thought of hearing John Milton or Emily Dickinson. We understand our own traditions and performance less well than we think.

Let's close this chapter with a look at one of the most influential attempts to find a way beyond this deadly conflict between languages and cultures, Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. First published in England in 1869, it is a textbook example of the clash between Them and Us, and although its dedication to a particular set of values has been strongly criticized over the years, I think it has things to tell us. It exemplifies the categorization of peoples into the barbaric and the civilized, and the dismissal of babblers and doodlers. But it also opens a window onto the ways in which we use these categories, and might get beyond them.

In language that still resonates in contemporary public policy, Arnold spoke of the importance of “getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world,” and of the urgent need to create a society in which the “coarsely tempered natures” of the “barbarians and philistines” would be imbued with the “sweetness and light” of a truly cultivated, civilized community. He celebrated the authority of what he called “touchstones,” stories and songs that embody the grace and power which inspire civilized conduct. In place of spiritual texts he proposed a secular canon of (mostly European) cultural touchstones which would provide the currency of a contemporary civilized society.

So far, it sounds appallingly self-satisfied, not to mention more than a bit ethnocentric. It was. But Arnold was not sitting on some elegant English verandah when he wrote *Culture and Anarchy*. His country was in the midst of a deadly serious economic depression, in which differences of region and class and race were writ large; it had just embarked on major democratic reforms (epitomized by the Reform Bill of 1867, which dramatically extended the franchise) that were dividing an already deeply divided country. He felt the menace of mid-nineteenth-century European revolution, and the anarchic forces of social, economic and political change that seemed to be sweeping his world.

Many of us might recognize our own countries all too easily in Arnold's nineteenth-century England. Like us, he had reason to be worried about the stresses and strains that were threatening to break up his badly fractured nation, one that had been described as more like two nations by its sometime prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli (in the title of one of his novels, *Sybil, or the Two Nations*). Reacting to this, Arnold tried to redefine the categories of rich and poor that Disraeli had identified as the root of the problem.

That's where Arnold fell into the trap that categories always lay for us, for he simply replaced these with another set of oppositions, this time between those with culture and those without. Arnold recapitulated the encounter between the Greeks and the Persians with which we began this chapter. And he did a good job. No debate about cultural relativity and no discussion of national identity in the past century has been able to ignore Arnold.

categorization of the world into civilians and barbarians. Culture and anarchy.

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They have become hard-wired into our consciousness, both as meaningless and as meaningful as table manners. We are unlikely to get clear of them any time soon, but the *choice* between them is something else. It is a foolish choice between false alternatives. It is a choice between being isolated or being overwhelmed, between being marooned on an island or drowning in the sea. We will see the temptation to make this choice over and over again in this book, and each time I will try to show how dangerous and sometimes disastrous it can be.

For Arnold, it took the form of a choice between a society with civil ceremonies and one without, between listening to Mary Johnson sing her song in Gitksan and insisting that it be written down in English. A choice between having some sense of tradition, of convention, of table manners ... and having none. Not different ones, but none at all. Or so he saw it. In some ways he was not so different from those first settlers. The spectre of anarchy haunted him like a nightmare.

But Arnold had a dream. It was a dream of a common culture, celebrating common meanings and values, with ceremonies that confirm a common purpose. It is the dream of many communities who want to affirm their collective identity along lines of region or race or gender or religion. Most importantly, it is the dream of ceremony itself.

This is the dream that came naturally to ancient societies and has shaped much of our modern world. And it is a dream that accommodates conflict. That's what Arnold didn't understand; and we have inherited his misunderstanding. Culture is *always* threatened by anarchy, as belief is by doubt. That's the essential nature of both culture and belief, and it is protected by ceremony. Conflict is at the heart of the way language works, and therefore the way stories work as well. Ceremonies are the custodians of this; and the real power of ceremony is not in achieving peace, as Arnold hoped, but in embracing contradiction. Pluralism is a danger not because it creates conflicts, as he thought, but because it masks them.

## Doodlers



*CULTURE AND ANARCHY* was about ceremonies of belief, from constitutional texts to creation stories. Matthew Arnold stayed away from the former, because the United Kingdom did not have a constitution; and from the latter, because Darwin had just thrown the cat among the pigeons by seeming to set evolutionary theory into conflict with the book of Genesis. Had Arnold turned to them, he might have discovered how they embody the very conflicts and contradictions he was trying to puzzle out. For to an outsider, both creation stories and constitutions often sound like a lot of babble.

Let's look at one that brought the people of Montana into the United States in 1889. They came in with a constitution, a story that told who they were and why they belonged right there. It is interesting to compare the constitutions of the State of Montana and of the United States to illustrate how different kinds of communities in different times and places imagine themselves. Both begin with the words "We the people." The United States Constitution then identifies the specific purposes of government. Montana's constitution, on the other hand, begins this way: "We the people of Montana, grateful to God for the quiet beauty of our state, the grandeur of its mountains, the vastness of its rolling plain...."

Why did they go on like this? "It would be possible to argue that they were simply being long-winded in a document which should be lean and concise," says the philosopher and politician Daniel Kemmis, who lives in Montana. In other words, that they were babbling. "But it could also be argued that they said not a word more than they had to say; and that what they had to say was that the way they felt about the place they inhabited was an important part of what they meant when they said 'we the people.'" Were their feelings about the place real or imagined? Well, they imagined the aboriginal people of that part of the plains right out of the picture; and that became a real fact of life. But they also imagined themselves into existence as a state of the union.

Imagine the Indians back into the picture for a moment. When the Siksika (Blackfoot) chief Isapo-muxika (Crowfoot) signed a treaty with the new Canadian government just a few years earlier and just a few miles north, he spoke for his people: "We are the children of the plain; it is our home, and the buffalo has been our food always." And he gave a prayer for "the mountains, the hills and the valleys, the prairies, the forests and the waters, and all the animals that inhabit them." Rhetorical babble? Perhaps. But he could have been writing the Montana constitution.

Other than constitutions, there are no stories more fraught with conflict than creation stories, especially since many societies believe two or more; and there are no stories that invite us to dismiss them quite as quickly. My first lesson in this came from my godmother, who with a nice irony came from a settlement in Saskatchewan called Qu'Appelle. Whatsitsname. Sh

was half-breed, and even more unsure of who she was and where she belonged. She told me how Indians came by a bridge across the Bering Strait from Russia; and she took me to see the dinosaur bones up in the badlands by Drumheller. “Were there Indians around then?” I asked. “Indians have been here forever,” she answered, speaking words given to her by her Cree grandmother. These stories, of course, completely contradicted each other.

There was another creation story, and another kind of constitution, which my godmother believed as well. She had been told this one by her Scottish grandfather. Repeated from the Americas to Australia and across Africa, it was the settler’s story. In this story, the new worlds were empty places. *Terra nullius* was the name in Latin, the old language of empire. The maps of the time give a picture of the place: rivers and prairies and mountains and lakes ... with nobody there. “It’s nobody’s home,” said the newcomers. “Therefore it’s ours.”

There *were* people there, of course, a lot of them, and this *was* their home. But the settlers quickly invented a myth of entitlement—a constitution, a creation story—to match the myth of discovery. In this story the aboriginal hunters and gatherers they met were just wandering about like beasts of the field, living idle lives on idle land. Certainly they were not farming, which is what civilized people did.

The way people behave—their way of life, or livelihood—often separates them even more than language does. We routinely divide people according to what they do, and whether they do the things that we think grown-up people, civilized people, ought to do.

There’s something else involved in this. One of our oldest conflicts is between those who dream about things and those who do things, between those who sing songs and tell tales and those who raise meat, grow vegetables and cook supper. Doodlers and doers. The useless and the useful.

For millennia, societies have distinguished between the people who work in the yard and the people who play in the tower. In the yard, people supposedly make themselves useful by doing things; in the tower they rise above all that and dream, uselessly.

We are constantly distinguishing between them, even though we know that they are two sides of the same coin. Hunters dance the hunt and dream it and draw it on the rock ... and then they head out to the hills. Warriors fight because someone told them a story; and they sing as they go into battle. Apollo is the god of both the lyre and the bow, of both song and struggle. The Taoist sage Chuang Tzu used to celebrate the ideal of *wu wei*, or active non-activity.

Still, the opposition between the useless and the useful has a hold on us. The classification of entire livelihoods as useless goes on every day, most obviously in the employment categories that disregard the work of raising families or of hunting for food. The classification of land as idle—land that is not used for agricultural purposes or owned by someone—has provided the basis for countless colonial adventures in the settlement of aboriginal territories, and it is still invoked to justify the encroachment on so-called wilderness lands.

The encounter between natives and newcomers all around the world for thousands of years has been premised on a distinction between doers and doodlers, typically identified as people who settle down and people who roam about. It has created conflicts for a very long time, much longer than any distinction between people on the basis of colour or creed. Let me give

an example of the kind of misunderstanding upon which this distinction is based, and why it appeals to us.

Some years ago, I spent time in Australia working with aboriginal communities on land claims that were similar to those of the Gitksan. As I travelled I heard stories of an Englishman who was wandering about the country and writing down his impressions. His name was Bruce Chatwin; and *The Songlines* was the immensely popular book he eventually wrote. It was a tribute to the Aborigines of Australia as the original wanderers, and a praise song to a way of life Chatwin could only dream about, one that he had lost in childhood. A life of perpetual doodling. Good doodling, mind you. Spiritual doodling. Doodling in the outback, where everything is true and beautiful and good. But doodling nonetheless.

Think about it. Aborigines, who know the names of every plant and the location of all the water holes, as perpetual nomads? Europeans in a place ten thousand miles from home, as settlers? It doesn't make sense. For millennia, farming people have roamed around the world looking for new places and dreaming of the home they left behind, moving on after a generation or so to other new places. And we call these people—Chatwin's people, my people, Us—"settlers"? The other people, the indigenous people who have lived in the same place for tens of thousands of years ... we call Them "wanderers"? It's hard to imagine a more cockeyed set of categories.

The truth is that We are the nomads and They are the settlers. But thanks to the likes of Bruce Chatwin (and every generation has its designer vagabonds), we project the confusion onto those whose nomadic lives we envy ... and whose land we often want. Chatwin's story, like that of Columbus, had little to do with Aborigines and a lot to do with his own anxieties and ambitions. Chatwin was looking for home and he found it thousands of miles away in an ideal of wandering, just as his ancestors had for hundreds of years. Columbus was looking for India, and he found it in the people he called Indians. This reminds me of Majorcan storytellers who always begin by saying "It was and it was not;" indeed, I am not sure that we don't believe stories like this, even—or especially—when we know they are not true. The possibility may help us understand the appeal of stories that are so wrong-headed. They celebrate habits of belief, not a set of events.

The story Chatwin tells is a familiar one to many of us. It is nicely incorporated into our contemporary image of stability and security, the family farm ... always with too many children to support, so that sooner or later they must go out and find new places to farm, displacing another group of people who have been there since time immemorial. But the story goes back over ten thousand years to the Neolithic migrations of agricultural peoples; it is found in both the Bible and the Qu'ran, each representing traditions of agricultural enterprise. It is there in Xhosa and Zulu praise songs, and in the Bhagavadgita. It is shared by herders and farmers of all times and places and races and creeds, for whom what they do and how they do it defines what civilization is all about. And it draws a clear line between Them and Us, or between childlike, wandering doodlers and civilized, settled doers.

For those of us who grew up during the 1940s and 1950s in North American families, the guide to what was civilized was provided by a series of books written by Will and Ariadine Durant called *The Story of Civilization*. The Durants were not the denizens of privileged institutions; they taught recent immigrants at the Labor Temple and the People's Institute

New York, and their criteria were not exclusively European. But they *were* agricultural. In the first volume, setting out the frame of reference, Will Durant considered the Middle East, North Africa, China, Japan and, most of all, India. “The conditions of civilization,” he said, are “economic provision, political organization, moral traditions and the pursuit of knowledge and the arts. It begins where chaos and insecurity end.” In other words, to be civilized is to settle down and start farming.

For their part, of course, aboriginal societies thought of themselves as the civilized ones. “There goes the neighbourhood,” they said when they saw the settlers arriving. They believed the place was indisputably theirs. They had stories of being there forever, and of how the rivers and prairies and mountains and lakes with which they shared dominion over the land came into being. The so-called settlers seemed like the wanderers to them, strange presences. Around 1840, a British explorer named George Grey wrote about the Australian Aborigine impression of the Europeans who were moving onto the land. He reported that since the Aborigines had no thought of ever leaving their land, they also had no notion of other folks leaving theirs. “When they see white people suddenly appear in their country, and settle themselves down in particular spots, they imagine that they must have formed an attachment for this land in some other state of existence, and hence conclude the settlers were at one period black men, and their own relations.” White is the colour of death, after all.

In the [previous chapter](#), I talked about the false choice that is so often presented to us, the choice between being marooned on an island and drowning in the sea. Stories and songs can frustrate that choice if we let them. That’s their great gift to us. They do so by constantly negotiating between belief and doubt, and between reality and the imagination, finally embracing both in a contradiction that brings us back to our babbling and doodling days.

Let me give an example of how this works. It is from the best-known of all cowboy songs, “Home on the Range.” Composed over 125 years ago, its opening rhyme is still so familiar to many in North America that it seems like a member of the family: “O give me a home, where the buffalo roam.” Listen to the rhymes: “home” and “roam.” Although bound together by similar sounds, their senses pull in completely opposite directions. Settling down and wandering. It’s hard to imagine a more basic human opposition, or a more fundamental condition in the Americas, or indeed in Africa, Asia, Europe or Australia for that matter. Our imaginations take this in every time we sing this song, and we remember these lines not because they tell a single truth but because they tell two contradictory ones.

Of course, I wasn’t thinking about any of this when I tried to balance peas on my knife. I was six years old, living on the prairies in the west of Canada, and I had a friend who knew how to yodel. Coming from Vancouver, where I was born, my contribution was “*Kla-how-y Tillicum*,” a phrase in Chinook, the language that had developed over a couple of hundred years of contact between natives and newcomers on the West Coast. The local newspaper had started the Tillicum Club, with a badge and a bookmark, and they said it was a good way of greeting people. So every day we would parade along the street, yodelling and yelling. Sometimes I would add one of the songs I had heard on the radio, like “Home on the Range.”

We must have been a strange sight. But for a youngster on the prairies in the 1940s, the whole world seemed strange. The ghosts of the past—cowboys and Indians, the broncs and

the buffalo that were part of their story—were all around. They would come to life every summer in the Calgary Stampede, one of the great rodeos of the West, and in the “Indian Days” that accompanied it when riders from the tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy would bring their horses into town, decked out in the marvellous bead and leather work of the traditional regalia.

Aside from that summertime carnival, cowboys and Indians came to most of us in stories and songs. One of the first collections of folk songs in the Americas was John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, published in 1910. And the speeches of Indian leaders like Chief Joseph and Sitting Bull and Chief Seattle and Tecumseh were the stock-in-trade of schools. Indeed, from the early 1800s, the speeches of Indian chiefs were quoted in encyclopedias around the world to illustrate the purest form of civil ceremony and poetic power.

Along with the speeches, of course, there were the hair-raising stories. I grew up with tales about the Sioux scalping settlers and leaving their mutilated bodies for the birds. But I also grew up with my grandfather telling about Sitting Bull, who was his contemporary, asking:

What treaty that the whites have kept has the red man broken? Not one. What treaty that the whites ever made with us red men have they kept? Not one. When I was a boy the Sioux owned the world. The sun rose and set in their lands. They sent 10,000 horsemen to battle. Where are the warriors today? Who slew them? Where are our lands? Who owns them? What white man can say that I ever stole his lands or a penny of his money? Yet they say I am a thief.

The contradictions didn't bother me. Like all children, I liked them. In fact, I wouldn't have recognized any story that didn't have some. I was learning something fundamental about stories, and how to believe them ... for we do have to *learn* how to believe. “It was, and it was not,” the storytellers of Majorca begin; and in my tradition they open with “Once upon a time,” conjuring up both time immemorial and bedtime. Among the herders and hunters of southern Namibia and the Kalahari where I have been working for the past few years, the word |*garube* is used (“|” indicates a soft click made at the front of the mouth); it means “the happening that is not happening.” “Infinity is a place where things happen that don't,” say mathematicians. The novelist E. L. Doctorow was once criticized for bringing characters together in his historical novel *Ragtime* who could not possibly have met in real life. “They have now,” he replied. *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* asks the French classicist Paul Veyne in the title of his book. Yes and no, he answers. “Believe it and not”—rather than “believe it or not”—is the challenge of every metaphor, of every myth, of every religion, of every community. When we forget that challenge, myth degenerates into ideology, religion into dogma, and communities into conflict.

With cowboys and Indians there was another contradiction, which is why I want to start with their stories and songs for a while. The cowboys—who invariably looked like Us—were the perpetual wanderers, the unmannerly buffoons; the Indians—who were unmistakably Them—were always at home, defending their lands with a freedom fighter's fierceness. In fact, in many of the stories and songs, cowboys were portrayed a lot like the wandering Indians of the popular imagination; and the Indians were a lot like the settlers in the



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