

Illusions for the Uninitiated: Traditional Special Effects in Potlatch Performances

By

Dionne Paul

Master of Applied Arts Low Residency

Emily Carr University of Art + Design

2016

A THESIS ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF

MASTER OF APPLIED ARTS LOW RESIDENCY

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2016

© Dionne Paul, 2016

Abstract

Nuxalk Nation potlatch performances are multidimensional displays of supernatural mythology done through the use of traditional special effects. This is an untold story which I bring to light by reclaiming the descriptions of the secret society, the Kusiut, as recorded by anthropologist Thomas McIlwraith, and in the discussions on my own art practice. There are similarities between Nuxalk traditional cultural production and western mainstream cultural production that I investigate with my writing and my art making. I use a form of hybridization of traditional special effects and mainstream special effects in the making of contemporary ceremonial art objects that, like the masks and blankets of the Nuxalk Nation, are meant to be performed and come to life. Both forms of special effects shape the socio-political issues of their time. Nuxalk winter dances, which are generally performed and witnessed mainly by First Nations community members, have foundational special effect techniques. I discuss and elaborate on them as a woman actively engaged in reclaiming, revealing and participating in the stories of my own people through art. Nuxalk secret society performers and the magic they created reconstructed realities that could be collectivized and set precedents that while not known to European based cultures, were demanding and technically extremely disciplined. My art practice builds on that discipline from the endless hours learning specific Nuxalk traditional methods to my own engagement in the assertion of matrilineal protocols. In addition I learned extensive special effects for mask from the film industry that include malleable materials to allow performers to emote facial expressions. Through conventional research methods and traditional practices, I have fabricated hybrid works of Nuxalk art that blend ancestral aesthetics with current techniques of the special effects industry. Researching Nuxalk ancestry has provided a lens to explore possible indigenous artistic advancement in my own art while ensuring that the foundational contributions of Nuxalk traditional techniques are acknowledged. Nuxalk potlatch performances and Non-First Nations stagecraft have both mesmerized audience's for generations. This work expands on those creative lineages weaving them together to hold space for a re-imaging of remnants from those dauntless cultural trailblazers of the Kusiut society.

Acknowledgements

Great Grandmothers and Great Grandfathers of the four sacred directions hear my humble prayer.

As I stand and face the direction of the east I say a prayer for our Asian brothers, sisters and two-spirited on mother earth. I say a prayer for the birth of all creatures, for the birth of all human beings, for the birth of time and for the birth of creativity. I acknowledge oneness. This direction represents fire, which offers warmth and illumination that devours all. Through destruction grows creation. I am thankful for morning, for spring, children and the spiritual self. I would like to acknowledge my children Shale Douglas, Mahalia Baturin, Zofia Baturin, Asanani Baturin and Nukal Baturin for being a consistent illuminating motivation during my time spent re-searching, creating and writing.

As I stand and face the direction of the south, I say a prayer for our darkest skinned brothers, sisters and two-spirited on mother earth. I say a prayer for the curiosity, innocence and trust of all creatures, all plants and all humans. I acknowledge growth. This direction represents water, which offers life-giving energy that cleanses all. I am thankful for afternoon, summer, adolescence, masculine energy and the emotional self. I would like to acknowledge the young female Nuxalk dancers who performed The Hao Hao and The Thunder dance in April 2014. The young female dancers are Trinity Mack, Rainwater Pootlass and Jade Mack. Their collective dauntless gesture was a profound pivotal shift in gender roles within cultural practices that I was fortunate to witness.

As I stand and face the direction of the west, I say a prayer for all things red and for our indigenous brothers, sisters and two-spirited on mother earth. I say a prayer for reflection, transformation and inner vision. I acknowledge intuition. I am thankful for evening, for autumn, for adulthood, feminine energy and the physical self. This direction represents earth, which offers material substance and transforms all. I would like to acknowledge the adults who helped me on this path. I raise my hands to Karen Anderson, Vanessa Hans, Alvin Mack, Lyle Mack, Faye Edgar, Tara Mack, Lance Mack, Ian Pootlass, and Chief Rhonda Schooner. These Nuxalk adults took me under their wing and shared their individual and collective teachings with me and I am eternally grateful. I would like to thank Dallas Harvey from Vancouver Makeup Effects. I would like to thank Hanna

Leona from Hanna Productions. I would not have been able to complete my self-directed study without the assistance of Melissa Meyer and Jennifer Kramer. I would like to thank Gwaai Edenshaw and Robert Studer for assisting in the production of the glass mask. I would like to acknowledge my husband William Baturin for consistently challenging me at every turn.

As I stand and face the direction of the north, I say a prayer for all things white and for our fair skinned brothers, sisters and two-spirited on mother earth. I say a prayer for harmony, balance, and meditation. I acknowledge wisdom. This direction represents air, which offers the non-physical realm and connects all. I am thankful for night, for winter, for elders, for nocturnal energy and for the intellectual self. I would like to acknowledge the elders in my life who support me as a mother, wife, teacher, student and artist. I would like to thank my parents Thomas Paul and Delores Paul for raising me with a strong cultural foundation. I would like to thank Hazel Hans Sr. "Ama" for granting those four young Nuxalk dancers permission to dance mask. I would like to express my gratitude towards Sandra Semchuk for travelling to Sechelt, for gathering medicines and sharing her teachings regarding my art and medicine practice. I would like to say thank to Chris Jones, Angeles Hernandez Correa, faculty and staff at Emily Carr University who assisted with my process.

I would like to offer a prayer for those who are homeless, incarnated, institutionalized, murdered and or missing, have mercy on their spirits and help them find their way Creator. If there is anyone or anything I have forgotten at this time Creator, please forgive me. I am young in this way of life, with all the love my heart, imagination in my mind and infinite spirit I say Thank you.

ALL MY RELATIONS

Table of contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgments	3
Table of contents	5
List of figures	6
Preface	8
 Chapter One: Fable Factor	
Introduction	10
Special Effects	12
Secret Society	10
Poetic Faith	11
 Chapter Two: Visual effects in Nuxalk Cultural Production	15
Scripted Spaces: Potlatches	15
Transmutations: Cultural lip reading	16
Strings & Pulleys: Puppets, eyelids and erotica	17
Fire & Lights: Fire-rattle and a war chief	20
A Matter of Bladder: Stomach-cutting and grizzly bears	23
 Chapter Three: Traditional Special Effects in ACTION	26
Transmutations: Foam latex mask	26
Stings and Pulley's: <i>Trans</i> -formation button blanket	31
Fire & Lights: Fiber optic headdress	33
A Matter of Bladder: Purging medicine woman mask	36
Conclusion	37
 Reference list	42

List of Figures

Fig. 1. Smith, Harlan I. 61810 – TIMOTHY IN COSTUME. *The Bella Coola Valley: Harlan I. Smith Fieldwork Photographs, 1920- 1924*. Canada: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991. Print. Permission pending.

Fig 2. Paul, Dionne. THE ECHO MASK. 1860. Wood carved mask with 6 interchangeable mouthpieces. Credit Union, Bella Coola.

Fig 3. Smith, Harlan I. 58809 – NEBBIE WITH MASK *The Bella Coola Valley: Harlan I. Smith Fieldwork Photographs, 1920- 1924*. Canada: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991. Print. Permission pending.

Fig. 4. Smith, Harlan I. 58785 – FIGURE. *The Bella Coola Valley: Harlan I. Smith Fieldwork Photographs, 1920- 1924*. Canada: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991. Print. September 21, 1924. Permission pending.

Fig. 5. Bukwus. Year unknown. Artist unknown. Acwsalcta School, Bella Coola BC. Photographer Dionne Paul. Viewed on April 2014. Permission pending.

Fig. 6. Paul, Dionne. Her Shaming Headdress. 2013. Cedar, ermine pelt, wood, string. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 7. Paul, Dionne. His Shaming Headdress. 2013. Cedar, ermine pelt, shell, and pearls. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 8. Baturin, William. The Stomach Cutting Dance. 2015. Pencil on paper. Sechelt, Canada. Permission granted.

Fig. 9. Smith, Harlan I. 56877 – SON OF W. MACK IN COSTUME. *The Bella Coola Valley: Harlan I. Smith Fieldwork Photographs, 1920- 1924*. Canada: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991. Print. September 21, 1924. Permission pending.

Fig 10. Paul, Dionne. Monster clay sculpt mask. 2014. Monster clay on life cast. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 11. Paul, Dionne. Foam Latex mask. 2014. Foam latex mask on life cast. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 12. Paul, Dionne. Airbrushed foam latex mask. 2014. Acrylic on foam latex. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 13. Leona, Hanna. Transforming with lights. Film still. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 14. Mack, Lyle. Transformation mask. 2014. Acrylic on hand carved red cedar. Bella Coola, Canada. Permission granted.

Fig. 15. Mack, Lyle and Paul, Dionne. Transcendence. 2014. Acrylic on hand carved red cedar and acrylic on foam latex. Bella Coola and Sechelt, Canada. Permission granted.

Fig. 16. Paul, Dionne. Transformation Button Blanket primary crest. 2014. Melton fabric, mother of pearl buttons, backpack harness and strings and pulleys. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 17. Paul, Dionne. Transformation Button Blanket secondary crest. 2014. Melton fabric, mother of pearl buttons, backpack harness and strings and pulleys. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 18. Paul, Dionne. Transformation Button Blanket inside view. 2014. Melton fabric, mother of pearl buttons, backpack harness and strings and pulleys. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 19. Paul, Dionne. Fiber Optic Headdress unlit. 2014. Merino wool, otter fur and fiber optic lights on mannequin. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 20. Paul, Dionne. Fiber Optic Headdress lit. 2014. Merino wool, otter fur and fiber optic lights on mannequin. Sechelt, Canada.

Fig. 21. Paul, Dionne. Purging Medicine Woman Mask with bladder apparatus. 2015. Glass, vinyl, various fluids and salmon eggs. Vancouver, Canada.

Fig. 22. Paul, Dionne. Purging Medicine Woman. 2015. Installation. Vancouver, Canada.

Preface

My name is Ximiq “the first eyelash of sunlight that comes over the mountain to greet everyone in the morning” and my English name is Dionne Paul. My origin story begins in North Vancouver where I was transplanted (adopted) from my biological Nuxalk mother Cynthia Moody to her Nuxalk aunt Delores Paul who was married to a Sechelt man Thomas Paul. I was raised in Sechelt, but with close ties with my mom Cynthia and extended Nuxalk family.

Delores did not attend residential school and speaks her language fluently, she spoke to me in Nuxalk before I attended kindergarten and transferred her teachings of spirituality, ceremony and ritual onto me throughout my life. My father Thomas was a day scholar of the Sechelt Residential School, which means he did not reside at the school. He was one of the first band members from the Sechelt Nation to attend high school. He went on to college and served as Chief and Council member for 22 years for the Sechelt Nation. He raised me with a strong work ethics, encouraged education, supported my artistic nature, and looking back he was the first feminist I knew. He instilled in me a deep sense of personal capability and self-confidence.

Although I was raised in a home that promoted both Nuxalk Nation and Sechelt Nation culture alongside a western education, I have always felt an internal longing and searching for my Nuxalk roots. I remember at a very young age (perhaps as young as 7 or 8) setting up a cassette tape player in the bathroom and playing a tattered cassette tape of the senior elders singing Nuxalk songs while in a bubble bath. I played it over and over, straining to hear the words, memorizing every verse of every song while envisioning potlatches I had attended. When the tape went missing, I was heart broken and searched for that cassette tape for years. I never found it; it was lost somewhere in my childhood. *Illusions for the Uninitiated: Traditional Special Effects in Potlatch performances* is an echo of this internal desire to reconnect with my Nuxalk roots and to participate in a memory culture - retrieving cultural memories, transferring cultural testimonies, misremembering, cultural memory loss, memories still asleep and my personal memories and experiences.

I am a First Nations woman of today descending from two distinct First Nations cultures ~ the Nuxalk Nation and the Sechelt Nation. In this thesis I am re-searching my matrilineal line, that of

the Nuxalk. The Nuxalk occupy the land known as Bella Coola in the central west coast of British Columbia. I am a transplanted being living away from my matrilineal land base, yet raised with cultural knowledge and mannerisms of both Nations respectively. I am offering a contemporary indigenous post-colonial, pre-decolonized feminine crosshairs view of the mythology, supernatural, spirituality and magic of Nuxalk Potlatch performance art objects and the behind the scenes mechanisms of a secret society known as the Kusiut of the Nuxalk Nation. I am searching, I am re-searching, and I am trying to re-imagine that which has not been seen.

Chapter One: Fable Factor

Introduction

The theoretical framework that underpins my work is very much rooted in indigenous re-search paradigms, the first of which Shawn Wilson's¹ book *Research as Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* refers to as relational ontology. Relational ontology is the relationship one has with people, the land, the cosmos and ideas. It is a notion that resonates with the way of working and understanding of sacred observance. He also describes himself as a storyteller rather than a researcher, which allows for cultural recognition and a smooth transmission of information.

Another framework I call upon is, what John Baker², who wrote the introduction to *The Bella Coola Indians*, refers to as, participating in a Nuxalk memory culture, a process of active collaboration in retrieving individual and collective cultural information and compilation of descriptions of previous Nuxalk ways of knowing. The locus of this thesis re-search has been to bring together the unearthing of traditional special effects in Potlatch performances and the creation of new art objects that speak to intuitive design of ceremonial objects. It is my hope that I may contribute new possibilities and modalities within Nuxalk and Northwest Coast visual art, secular performances and ceremonial spaces.

Another indigenous framework I call upon is the weaving analogy, where I describe some of my research as threads of information that are pulled together to generate new images. I take strands of information, substance, lore and permutation and weave them together, disentangle them, pause and then re-weave them together again. You will see in the art objects I created how I weave strands of Nuxalk cultural practice with modern materials and my creative sensibility to conjure a kind of re-imagining or projection of possibilities of Nuxalk aesthetics.

An analogy occurred to me when considering my resources as a select group of people known in Coast Salish longhouse ceremonies as 'witnesses'. Witnesses are audience members at a longhouse gathering who are asked to witness (to remember) the ceremonial work that is taking

¹ Wilson, Shawn. "Re-search as Ceremony: Indigenous Re-search Methods" Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008. Print.

² McIlwraith, T.F. "The Bella Coola Indians" University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1948. Print.

place. Witnesses are a cultural record keeping system based on memory, first hand experience, eyewitness testimony, observational recall and oral descriptions. I consider my resource references as ceremonial witnesses of that time period. I call on McIlwraith as a ceremonial witness of that time period. T. F. McIlwraith was an anthropologist that worked with the Nuxalk Nation for roughly 11 months during 1922 – 1924 detailing the original, uncontaminated Bella Coola type and I have invited his written words to speak into my talking circle that is this thesis.

I may be privileging a non-First Nation, academic anthropologist's fieldwork when I quote McIlwraith and the transcriptions of interviews he did so extensively. I am quite aware of the problematic approach of anthropology and harmful effects of colonialism as pertains to the reframing and appropriation of sex, race, politics, land, resource, language, spiritual teachings and cultural ways of knowing into Eurocentric epistemologies. I have considered the socio-political landscape of that era – imperialistic motives, the colonial gaze, racial biases, sexist attitudes, otherness, language barriers and the ideology of 'salvage' ethnography. That knowledge is known.

What is not known is how I saw first hand how the Nuxalk art and language instructors at Acwscstsa School treated T.F. McIlwraith's transcriptions and writings in *The Bella Coola Indians* with respect and appreciation. While teaching at Acwscstsa school in Bella Coola, BC, as artist in residence for 5 weeks, I witnessed the Nuxalk staff refer his transcription of specific Nuxalk people such as Joshua Moody on a regular basis, converse about topics brought up from McIlwraith's writings, poke fun at him and even sing Happy Birthday over the intercom on April 8, 2015. It was his 116 birthday. From my interactions with the Nuxalk art and language staff, artists, dancers, elders and my family members I saw that they are aware of McIlwraith's personal attitudes and judgments towards the Nuxalk people, but they seemed willing to overlook these character defects as symptomatic of the times and focus on positive aspects of cultural preservation he left for all Nuxalkmc. So I am respectful of their wider view.

I write in a polyphonic way throughout my thesis to hold space for multiple layers of voices to take the floor. For example, I wrote my acknowledgements in a sweat lodge prayer format in order to clear the path with a good heart, so that I say thank you in the way I was taught by my mother and we may then enter into my work in a good way. This layering of voices alternates from first person voice to direct quotes, to conversations with my family members, to sharing messages

from my personal dreamtime. I cannot tell this story on my own, I require traveling back through time and space to sift through remnants or shards of spoken and written testimonies from Nuxalk chiefs, artists and elders and re-constructed memories to conceptualize my thesis. At times one voice disrupts the conventions of another, hopefully opening up the possibilities for transmission to occur.

Special Effects

In my thesis I investigate special effects as technical portals to transformations. Special effects in contemporary western society are conventionally seen as manipulations of lighting, sound, costume, stage props and/or performance used in theatre, film, and television to enhance the story being told. Traditional special effects in Nuxalk Potlatch performances are similar to western special effects in that they are manipulations of lighting, sound, regalia, masks, ceremonial props, and pyrotechnic (smoke and fire). These techniques are used to enhance the story being embodied and performed specifically for ceremonial purposes. Special effects in non-first Nations representations have captivated audiences for decades with their mystified sensory form of storytelling.

Western performance arts and Nuxalk ceremonial dancing both share an intensive multidisciplinary training that takes years of hard work and dedication to master. For instance, in western cultures a performer must have working knowledge of drama, dance, music, costume design, set design and acting. In indigenous cultures a performer must also have working knowledge of storytelling, ceremonial dance, regalia, masks, drums, rattles, whistles, noisemakers, song composition, and theatrics. These common threads will be woven throughout my research and body of work.

I propose that the purpose, process and product of western instruments of illusion possess parallels with some aspects of the traditional special effects of the Nuxalk winter dances. I resolved to tease out parallels between well-known special effects practices and First Nations cultural production and to create a body of work that would bring to the surface issues of contemporary society that widen to include the Nuxalk.

Secret Society: Kusiut society

Through re-search, of my own people the Nuxalk Nation, the Kusiut society was a secret society of both male and female performers. The Kusiut society was a clandestine group of artists, dancers, performers, and singers who are believed to have possessed supernatural powers through initiation into this secret society.

I asked elders, family members; mask carvers and dancers one question. That question was, “Are there any Kusiut today, if not did they know who the last Kusiut was”? The answer was that they didn’t know. They said it was a ‘secret’ society, so membership was kept secret. I was told that some of the Nuxalk are trying to bring back the secret societies beginning with the Sisioak society, a society of Hereditary Chiefs, but that is considered controversial for a varied of reasons that they did not want to discuss.

I now call on T.F. McIlwraith to share the knowledge of my ancestors.

“The word *Kusiut* is connected etymologically, according to native belief, with *siut*, the term for a supernatural being. Thus the meaning of the society’s designation is “The Supernatural,” or “The Learned,” for *siut* has both these significations. A member of the society is likewise called a *Kusiut*, plural, *Kukusiut*.”³ The term *kusiut* could be translated as the ones who know about the supernatural.”

The supernatural powers of the Kusiut are believed to surpass the natural law of nature and permeate into otherworldliness or thinning the veil between spiritual realms. The Kusiut society performed ancestral legends during potlatch ceremonies and accumulated a highly regarded repertoire of traditional special effects to conjure a visual demonstration of connections to supernatural forces. The uninitiated audience in attendance of these potlatch performances would be astounded by these traditional special effects that could include a Kusiut performer being beheaded, burned alive, disemboweled or transformed. These effects along with collective belief in the supernatural would have invoked a fear and other emotions within the uninitiated

³ McIlwraith, T.F. Vol II, p1 “The Bella Coola Indians” University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1948. Print.

audience. The Nuxalk people continue to hold a firm conviction of the dynamism of supernatural energies.

Stomach cutting dances spewing entrails, a drowning dance, hand rattles that sparked real fire embers when shaken, bird puppets flying overhead, puppet necklaces animated by performer, a grizzly bear dance with a mask that appears to rip off the flesh of another Kusiut, masks that vomit, bentwood boxes filled with hot lava rocks creating an aromatic steam. It is these shocking visual achievements that instill an unwavering faith in the audience that the veil between the spirit realm and the material world has become so thin that transcendence is possible. The members of the secret society are the keepers of this knowledge.

Poetic Faith

I am trying to understand the western idea of poetic faith. 'That willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith' is a well-known phrase coined in 1817 by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Poetic faith refers to the conscious choice audience members make to overlook the limitations of the performance in order to accept and indulge in the premise of the story.

There is a kind of embedded agreement an audience invests in the act of watching a narrative that implies that they are mindful, to some degree, that what they are seeing is not truth. Yet for the sake of their own entertainment they choose to interrupt this mindfulness and accept the story that is being performed. The concept of suspension of disbelief is an important component to the success of the special effect, which in turn propels the story further. As you will read further, this premise corresponds to the beliefs of the uninitiated Nuxalk audience witnessing a Kusiut performance, but with drastically different concepts of cultural audience participation in comparison to western audiences.

When I imagined the similarities and differences of these audiences, I thought about the wider societies that these people were situated in time and space. One difference that stood out for me was the fear experienced by the people in the audience. Western audiences did not live in fear of the performers on stage—did not fear of living amongst neighbors who possess magical powers based on the fantastical performances. The uninitiated audience

members of the Nuxalk lived among the Kusiut who held the secret knowledge of the supernatural. It was said that if you suspected that a house may belonged to someone in the Kusiut society, then you one walked past that home briskly and respectfully so not as to offend the inhabitant. In a conversation with Alvin Mack, a Nuxalk art instructor, he shared with me that the fear of the Kusiut was always eminent and that it was known that in some cases the punishment for unintentional observation of a traditional special effect was death. He said in later years the sentence handed down by the Kusiut was lowered to a kidnapping, frightening the uninitiated Nuxalk into believing he would be killed. Instead he was dragged to a secret location where he was not killed, but initiated into the society. It was now his responsibility to protect the secrets of the Kusiut.

It was a collective Nuxalk worldview that was being protected.

Mythology is a fundamental feature in every culture around the world that allows us to create order in a chaotic existence. Innovation in special effects and mechanical illusions within storytelling, whether they are spiritual or spectacle, invade our understanding of what is said to exist in our material world. Myth making, as employed by Northwest Coast Nations on the longhouse floor, is a sacred way of explaining how the world and humankind came into being. It is embodied performative storytelling. Western representation of special effects within film, cinema and theatre presents a type of mythopoeia, the re-making of myths. Myths can be found in the supernatural and anthropomorphic beings superimposed in space and time from ancient pictographs to present-day art forms elucidating philosophical questions that human being have been asking since the dawn of time: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? The performance of mythology has the possibility to connect the people in a shared cultural consciousness, in the value of being.

In both Nuxalk and western mythological performances there is reality effect⁴ that follows a suspension of disbelief. A reality effect is a phrase coined by Roland Barthes, which refers to the way the small details of person, place or object that makes the story 'feel real', give it atmosphere. In order for film, television or theatre to maintain a reality effect, the visual effects within the performance must be flawless. Visual effects use a variety of processes to manipulate imagery in

⁴ Hill and Wang. "Roland Barthes: The Rustle of Language" New York, 1975. Online.

order to generate a convincing simulated hyper-realized experience. This is also true for performances of the Kusiut society within Potlatch ceremonies. Kusiut artists devise and design traditional special effects to manipulate what the audience sees to generate a convincing story through song, dance and oratory. The reality effects produced by the traditional special effects of the Kusiut along with the collective consciousness within the greater Nuxalk society support the suspension of disbelief.

In both Northwest Coast and western mythological performances there is reality effect that follows a suspension of disbelief. In order for film, television or theatre to maintain a reality effect, the details of the visual effects within the performance must be flawless. Visual effects use a variety of processes to manipulate imagery in order to generate a convincing simulated hyper-realized experience. This is also true for performances of the Kusiut society within Potlatch ceremonies. Kusiut artists devised and designed traditional special effects to manipulate what the audience sees to generate a convincing story through song, dance and oratory. The reality effects produced by the traditional special effects of the Kusiut along create a collective consciousness

In my travels through historical literature and oral re-search with elders, artists, mask dancers and art instructors, I have found passages and information that speak directly about reality effects during the ceremonial winter dances of the Kusiut society. "The importance of the society depends on the belief of the uninitiated in the supernatural powers of its members... and most of this information was obtained from men who well remember their sensations when not a member."⁵ Nuxalk belief system and certainty in the supernatural superseded the need to suspend judgment of the implausibility of the narrative, performance or mechanisms involved.

Kusiut performances were absolutely sensational. The Kusiut dances generated fantastical sights such as transformation masks that opened up to reveal an entirely new mask inside or eyelids that retracted to show a glowing and flickering light within the mask. Kusiut dances produced alarming sounds such as frenzied screaming and hollering, banging sounds from underneath the floorboards, on the walls and on the roof, whistle sounds and thunder noise. Kusiut dances conjured curious smells from vomit being thrown up into a bentwood box onto preheated lava stones or the smell of blood and entrails spilling from a dancer's stomach. Kusiut invoked anxiety

⁵ McIlwraith, T.F. Vol II, p2 "The Bella Coola Indians" University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1948. Print.

through certain dances such as the Cannibal dance, the Scratcher dance and the Breaker dance in which the performers (under a trance like state) bite, scratch, and/or break items of the uninitiated members in the audience.

Through a complete invasion of the senses Kusiut members built up their performances to a feverish crescendo to create tantalizing physical sensations, emotional eruptions and a powerful spiritual experience that substantiated their superhuman prowess and reinforced their standing within the secret society and within the Nuxalk Nation. It is the use of these traditional special effects objects and mechanisms that assisted in the building of this crescendo that I am interested in unearthing and creating new art works in dialogue with.

A significant difference between western performances and that of the Kusiut is the cultural and systematic protection of the inside knowledge of the workings of such special effects.

Again, I call on T. F. McIlwraith to share what he learned from my ancestors.

“The scope of the Kusiut organization can be most clearly outlined by describing first what an uninitiated member knows about. From infancy, parents impress upon a child the supernatural powers of the Kukusiut and the dangers attached to their rites. Such instruction is perhaps strongest where one, or both, is not a member. They then voice their own fears, and do not merely deceive for the good of the society. Steeped in every child is a firm belief of the near presence of the supernatural.”⁶

This quote exemplifies the cultural imprinting process employed by Nuxalk teachings that cultivate the reality effect experienced in Potlatch ceremonies. An example of cultural imprinting within Nuxalk storytelling is the story of Sniniq: The Wild Woman of the Woods, which I was told and retold throughout my childhood.

When I was a young girl I remember my mom and aunts telling us the story of Sniniq. They said she was a supernatural being the size of a grizzly bear. She was human like but covered in long hair-like fur that was bluish black and had long hair like a woman. Her eyes flickered like

⁶ McIlwraith, T.F. Vol II, p3 “The Bella Coola Indians” University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1948. Print.

flames of a fire and could roll completely back revealing the ability to shoot beams of light that would harm anyone who was unfortunate enough to look into her eyes. She had a terrible stench about her, which also served as a warning that you were too close to her and should turn and run in the opposite direction immediately. She carried on her back a large woven basket with spikes inward and down facing to render it impossible for anything to escape once thrown in. My mom and aunts said that an accident occurred with the Sniniq's child and it died and she blamed the Nuxalk people and vowed to capture any naughty children or children playing outside after dark. My mom and aunts used this story to scare us into behaving and for the most part it worked. I was terrified of her and her wraith.

The fear factor of the stories of Sniniq inhabited my childhood and permeated my psyche. The Sniniq was my introduction into the spirit realm and ignited an unwavering trust of supernatural beings, mystical forces, multiple spiritual realms and the mystical veils of perception. In this example, I suspend the disbelief in a mythical creature – Sniniq- and hold space for the possibility of the supernatural not for entertainment, as in many western practices, but for the spiritual practice of moving towards my truth, my essence that partly resides in the Nuxalkmc awareness.

I am an audience member as well as a potlatch dancer and I know that there is a lot of behind the scenes action. It has been my intention to visually express my interpretations of the space between the performer and the viewer; the realms, beings and invisible forces created within my own practices. Through creations such as a foam latex mask that can emote facial expressions in a way wooden masks can not, a transformation button blanket that can open up to reveal a secondary crest in a way they have not previously, a woven headdress that can turn on fiber optic lights that blink to the beat of the drum, a glass medicine woman mask that can cry tears and purge stomach contents I have shared my sense of this intangible space.

Chapter Two: Visual effects in Nuxalk Cultural Production

Scripted Space: Potlatches

In the book *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*⁷ Norman Klein describes special effects as a technical marvel that controls an illusionistic setting that has been set up to deliver elaborate shocks. Within these shocks, an allegory emerges that immerses the viewer in a reassuring adventure. The adventure is often about a marvelous power larger than life, larger than humans alone can ever hope to be.

This statement by Klein, could also describe traditional special effects employed by Kusiut during Potlatch ceremonies. Traditional special effects deliver elaborate surprise during the cultural performances. Staged through a Potlatch dance program these elaborate surprises construct an astonishing adventure for the uninitiated audience. Mythology in Nuxalk Potlatch ceremonial performances and western special effects industry could be linked to the underpinnings of the term 'scripted spaces' a term coined by Klein.

In a vimeo (a video sharing website) interview by Katherine Bovee, Klein states, "The condition of this high consumer culture was about the viewer and power. That all these illusionistic spaces, themed environments, computer games and politics have a weird quality, they give you the illusion that you are really in and are an inside player. The scripted spaces is an environment programmed to give you the impression that there is a narrative where you are a central character."⁸

It is interesting to take this concept of scripted spaces and apply it to Potlatch performances to see how it corresponds. A Potlatch ceremony represents the multifaceted cultural infrastructure that governed some First Nations people along the Northwest Coast. This social framework is based on a complex system of wealth and exchange of wealth that validates social status through rites of passage ceremonies which in turn authorized claims to names, songs, dances, masks, spiritual privileges and social rank through public demonstrations of family lineages. The Potlatch system involved a hierarchy based on the accumulation, display and distribution of wealth. I see links in Klein descriptions of a scripted space and Potlatch ceremonies as it pertains to the uninitiated audience and power obtained by the Kusiut.

⁷ Klein, Norman. "The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects. New York: The New Press, 2004. Print.

⁸ Pacific Northwest Coast College. Bovee, Katherine. *A New Stage: Norman Klein on the Future of Scripted Spaces*.

Vimeo.com/17008887. 4 years ago. Website accessed April 15th 2015.

The micro society of the Kusiut within the Nuxalk Nation could be described as operating within the scripted space of the Potlatch system. What the audience preconceived before entering the scripted space of the longhouse, what they saw in the scripted space of the longhouse, what they heard in the scripted space of the longhouse, what they felt in the scripted space of the longhouse, what they smelled in the scripted space of the longhouse, what the overall experience was for the audience was all premeditated by the Kusiut society to elevate their social standing and gain cultural power through their elaborate shocks of their performances.

Transmutation: Cultural lip reading

I would now like to introduce some of the cultural characters that I spent time re-discovering and examining for individual reality effects. I present these cultural characters in order of the specific traditional special effect. I will further illustrate the relational relationship between this re-search and my new works of art.

The Echo Mask is a transformation mask of a supernatural being that possesses the ability of invisibility. A transformation mask is facial mask that can change its shape or appearance to express a metaphysical transformation through a traditional special effect, in this case interchangeable mouthpieces. The Echo Mask is designed to accommodate the swapping of multiple mouthpieces to express a different state of being or to create a facial expression on the mask that corresponds to the part of the story being danced.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The Echo mask performer dances around and when it is time to change mouthpieces he holds his regalia blanket in front of the mask to provide cover. Under this temporary facial curtain, he slides the current mouthpiece off and replaces it with the next mouthpiece. These mouthpieces would be contained in a pouch hidden under his regalia. He then lowers the regalia blanket to reveal the new mouthpieces and the audience would translate the new mouthpieces in a kind of cultural lip reading interpreting the new mouthpiece to understand the story being danced.

I have an older sister named Nikki on my biological father's side, she was raised with her mother in Alberta and I met her in my early adulthood. Nikki is deaf and uses sign language, lip reading and passing notes to communicate with people. We have fostered a close relationship over the years and she has visited my family in Sechelt a number of times. My husband, children and I would practice words in sign language before each arrival and we were all very eager to continue learning how to speak with our hands. A few years later while teaching in Bella Coola, I went to visit the Echo mask in Fig. 2, which is housed at the Bella Coola Credit Union. My auntie Karen had some banking to do and brought me along to view the mask. I stood looking at the Echo Mask and asked both the mask and myself "what are you trying to tell me?" It occurred to me that in order to understand what the Echo mask was communicating I would have to read the mouthpieces of the mask in the same way my sister Nikki lip-reads. I found the description of cultural lip reading an appropriate addition to my written work.

Transformation is a significant element of myth sharing and of understanding the veil between our material world and that of the spirit realm. Traditional special effects are the vehicle that activates and animates the cultural character within Potlatch performances and allows the performer to achieve a visual transformation. Traditional special effects weave together the Nuxalk legend, the cultural character, the performer and the audience into one pivotal moment where the ordinary becomes extraordinary and magic is possible. To witness a phenomenal feat such as a transformation unfold before your eyes is spellbinding for both the audiences of today of yesteryear. This type of reverential experience is timeless and unwavering in its marvel and could be comparable to watching a live performance of Cirque De Soleil, a world-renowned Canadian Circus company known for wondrous performances and high levels of discipline.

Strings and Pulley's: Puppets, eyelids and erotica

I call upon Harlin I. Smith, the anthropological photographer who made these photographs of masks and puppets, to share the brief descriptions he gathered from my ancestors about the following images.

"The information in *The Bella Coola Valley: Harlan I. Smith's Fieldwork Photographs, 1920 - 1924*⁹ accompanying the photograph of the puppet-patron in Fig 3 and Fig 4 states briefly that the puppet hangs from the performers neck and is operated by strings. Puppetry is an ancient form of storytelling whereby an inanimate object is activated through an apparatus of strings that is manipulated by a puppeteer."

⁹ Tepper, Leslie H. *The Bella Coola Valley: Harlan I. Smith Fieldwork Photographs, 1920 – 1924*. Quebec, 1991. Print.



Fig 3



Fig. 4

I call upon T.F. McIlwraith to offer substantiating Nuxalk memory regarding the systems of strings and pulley's in Nuxalk ceremonial dances.

"A whistle sounds, the Kukusiut women drone and the uninitiated see one of the puppets figurines move across the back of the house, though they do not see the concealed ropes by which this is managed... another device is to have the puppet suspended from the roof by means of similar cords, invisible in the darkness... Emphasis must again be laid on the awe, mystery and power of the ceremonies in the eyes of those who do not understand them, and the very great skill shown by the carpenters in the making use of hidden strings, trap-doors, and other devices to increase the dramatic effect."¹⁰

Strings are traditional special effect used to animate the reality effect in Kusiut dances whether it is making the transformation mask open and close or make the eyelids of the Bukwus mask open and close. In this case the strings are used to animate the actions of puppet-patron around the performers neck.

¹⁰ McIlwraith, T.F. Vol II, p132 "The Bella Coola Indians" University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1948. Print.

This Bukwus mask, which is housed at the Acwsalcta School, is another example of strings and pulley's in the retractable leather eyelids. The retractable eyelids peel back to reveal shiny sheets of copper that would appear to glow and flicker when danced near an open fire.



Fig. 5

The traditional special effect in this mask and performance is made possible by a string and pulley mechanism and the optical illusion of the light reflecting off the shiny copper. String and pulley system is a straightforward device that can be operated with ease and concealed effectively. This is a traditional special effect is a favorable choice that has been used in other ceremonial objects such as headdresses.

During my first summer intensive, I was preparing for *RezErect: Native Erotica* exhibit at the Bill Reid Gallery exploring indigenous sensuality and sexuality from the point of view of 27 First Nations artists. During my re-search into the cultural politics of sex and sexuality for this exhibition, I came across a Nuxalk marital shaming ceremony. These ceremonial art objects associated with this rite as described in *The Bella Coola Indians*, “the deserted wife used to dance, wearing above her head representations of a penis and testicles. By means of hidden strings she was able to cause the former to become erect.”

This art object distilled all my creative energies at that time – traditional special effects, gender roles within ceremony, sexual politics and indigenous humor. I set out with courage to investigate cultural implications both past and present through my creative process of re-imagining this previously unseen ceremonial art object.

I started with the female headdress, creating a headdress with male genitalia frontlet made from cedar and adorned with ermine skins. I then designed a male headdress with a female genitalia frontlet from cedar, ermine skin, clamshell and gemstones. I am sharing this personal story relative to the use of strings and pulleys because the story reveals the shock factor of ceremonial performances. Performance shocks frightened the uninitiated audience and deterred undesirable behaviors. Some of these cultural shocks employed humor.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

While creating these headdresses, I imagined the original Nuxalk artists who would have fashioned these headdresses and the conversations about the logistics. I imagined the laughter that was generated from these conversations and through their creation as I experienced moments of laughter in my studio. I imagined the actual ceremony of the shaming and the wife walking out onto the dance floor wearing the genitalia headdress and the dancing while activating the strings attached to the phallic frontlet and the roars of laughter that would undoubtedly follow the performance. I witnessed roars of laughter at the Bill Reid Gallery when I saw visitors interacting with my headdresses by trying them on

and activating the strings. It was next to impossible for them to not laugh and it was a joy to watch.

It occurred to me that the creative process of the making these ceremonial objects may have been a cathartic process for the maker and the ceremony itself a healing process for the married couple and extended family affected by the marital indiscretion. I was taught that laughter, humor and play are good medicine and perhaps this was true for these headdresses. I know I found myself in fits of laughter while activating the headdress for the first time. My husband laughed when he saw it on my head and in motion and the curators of the exhibition enjoyed burst of laughter in the video clips I sent them for pre-approval.

My creative process moves cyclically through several emotional stages: inspiration, building excitement, cultural identity euphoria, cultural responsibility anxiety, personal doubt, elder and/or collective critique panic, personal leap of faith, creative fortitude, exhaustion, gratification and then finally an ebbing of energy and a restorative period. Each piece I create moves multiple pathways. I conceive of each art object that I create with respect and careful consideration for the past, my ancestors, for the present and for future generations. I allow each piece to develop through these evolutionary stages to transfer a kind of interwoven agency.

Fire & Lights: Fire-rattle and a war chief

The Nuxalk believe the supernatural ones in the upper land resemble human beings and some are more powerful than other. The most powerful and most feared is the senior Kusiut, the Thunder. During the Thunder dance, wooden rattles pierced with holes were be filled with burning embers that would smoke and spark when shaken. The traditional special effect in this performance is the unique use of smoldering embers to embody the energy of a thunderstorm.

I listen to McIlwraith's written words from my ancestors witness in my mind:

"When the mighty supernatural one has almost completed a circuit of the fire he stops, holds out his shaking arms over it and absorbs power from the smoke. One of the Kukusiut thrusts into his hand a perforated rattle containing smoldering cedar bark. Carrying this, Thunder again leaps

down and dances around the fire shaking out the burning sparks from the rattle. The announcer cries out: The fire Kusiut of the supernatural ones has been with us; his fire is too wonderful for us.... Thunder informs the uninitiated that his fire-rattle is the bird of lightening, a mysterious creature”¹¹

The traditional special effect within this dance is the rattle that appears to be producing smoke and fire from within caused by the spirit of lightening. The merging of art and spirituality within cultural participation has been a consistent source of enchantment and pride that fuels my artistic curiosity to find the boundaries and forge new routes. I see where the spirit of the insurgent artist within me recognizes the ingenious and dauntless artist within the Kusiut society.

Yet another example of dauntless creations by the Kusiut society is in the Kitkatla War Chief dance. I have brought this dance into this writing to demonstrate a clever way to use ceremony in new format that both shocks and delights the audience. When my aunt told me the story, I felt shivers of excitement and chills running on my arms and up my back as the climax of the story built up to an explosive crescendo!

My Auntie Karen told me the story of a Kitkatla war chief who was so feared and respected that when he arrived on the shores of Bella Coola, the people built a platform for him to walk onto straight from his canoe so he wouldn't have to touch the ground. He was carried from the shore to the longhouse. The head chief from the Nuxalk Nation danced around the war chief sitting on a platform with a gun. At some point during the dance the Nuxalk chief stopped in front of the Kitkatla war chief and kneeled down on one knee and pointed the gun directly at his face. A hush fell over the crowd as everyone sat in silence. THE NUXALK CHIEF PULLED THE TRIGGER! (My aunt paused for what seemed like a long time.) Gasps and hollers filled the room as the audience thought he had shot and killed the Kitkatla Chief. Instead of killing the Kitkatla war Chief, eagle down came floating out of the barrel. (Eagle down feathers is our highest form of honor during any ceremony).

Again I call upon McIlwraith to tell the story as told to him:

¹¹ McIlwraith, T.F. Vol II, p 184 “The Bella Coola Indians” University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1948. Print.

“Having waited for several days the party came up the Bella Coola River, their canoe loaded with presents and eagle down, while *Tcibisa*’s brother *Ne:islo:s*, wore the mask of his Tutwinam as further proof of friendly intentions. It was unusual to display one except in a sisaok ceremonial, but this was an unprecedented event; he knew that he might soon be killed and he preferred to die while bearing the obvious mark of incorporation with some incident of an ancestral myth... *Pottes* (the last great Nuxalk Chief) himself had not spoken, but he now appeared and advised the people not to harm *Tcibisa*, since everlasting hostility would result. *Pottes* brought forward a moose-skin, and told some of his people to hold it spread so that, when *Tcibisa* leapt from his canoe, he would land upon it and could be carried to the house without putting foot to the ground. *Tcibisa* answered proudly that there was nothing on earth strong enough to support him, since his many potlatches had made him incomparably heavy. Nonetheless, he accepted the honor, as assistance to landing shown only to mighty chiefs and was carried into the house where he was seated in the far right-hand corner, an honorable location. Though *Pottes* had decided against the immediate killing of the Kitkatla, he had concocted a scheme to test their bravery and the sincerity of their desires for peace. No one knew of this except his nephew *Ne:xwinkai*, who was to carry it out. When all were seated, the latter appeared, his face smeared with ashes, and his hair tied up in a top-knot with weasel skins as a customary during war. *Ne:xwinkai* moved sun wise around the house, brandishing a musket and repeatedly pointing it at *Tcibisa* in a threatening manner. If the Kitkatla had shown nervousness, particularly if one of them had fired his own musket, a massacre would have resulted. But they remained unmoved, confident in the prestige of their leader, while he knew that though his body might be killed, his reputation would only be increased by the manner of his death. At length *Ne:xwinkai* fired into the air: not until a shower of eagle down was blown forth did anyone realize that his musket had been loaded with nothing more deadly. This marked the establishment of friendly relations.”¹²

This courageous performance was not only a cunning display of mastery of blending technologies of the time, but also in trickster fashion, an instantly recognized ceremonial honoring. This is an example of the hybridization or weaving together that which is ceremonial with that which is modern I aspire to in my current practice.

A Matter of Bladder: Stomach Cutting and grizzly bears

¹² McIlwraith, T.F. Vol II, p357 “The Bella Coola Indians” University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1948. Print.

My, arguably morbid, curiosity has uncovered what is known in the FX industry as a bladder system or blood gag. In simple terms, a bladder system is a bag with a tube connecting to the opening on the performers body, mask or costume.

The Stomach cutting dance is a perfect example of the marvelous devices in the illusionistic space that delivers elaborate shocks that Klein spoke of when talking about special effects.

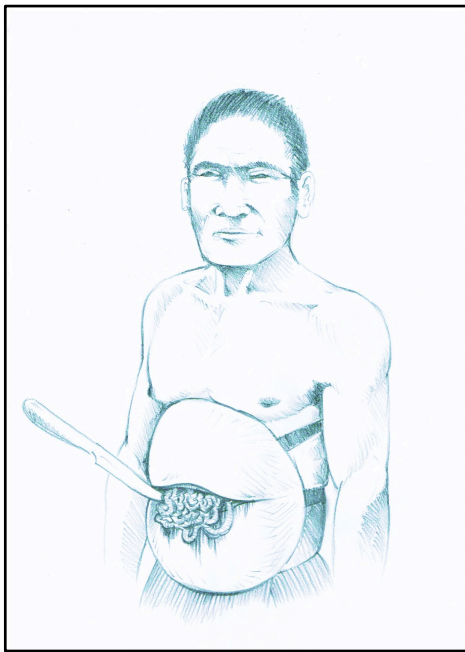


Fig. 8

I call upon McIlwraith to recite a personal account from *The Bella Coola Indians* from a 15-year-old Nuxalk boy.

“He was sitting with ten or twelve lads of his own age, each of who was asked by a marshal: “Are you brave?” Not one of them was willing to display his courage, even after repeated questionings. At this impasse the lad’s uncle, a prominent Kusiut, requested that his nephew be asked: so the question was put to him. He answered in the affirmative as his uncle had advised him to do. To

further question: "Are you willing to do what this man [the performer] may demand?" he also answered: "Yes" without knowing what he might be called upon to do."¹³

The frightened boy was asked to examine a knife, which was made from copper or obsidian in those days, to verify that it was in fact a real knife.

"X (assistant Kusiut dancer) showed him where to insert it, under the left bottom rib, and told him to draw it firmly across to the corresponding point on the other side. The boy did so; that victim cried out as if in pain, his hands shook, and when the entrails fell out, he dropped back dead. The youth, believing that he had killed the man, was terrified... as soon as X has fallen, pandemonium breaks out in the house. The Kusiut women weep and wail, whistles sound at intervals, and the effect is like bedlam."¹⁴

As I have stated, the stomach-cutting dance is the perfect example of the deliverance of a visual surprise that in turn reinforces the terrifying respect the non-Kusiut members of the audience held toward the Kusiut society.

In my re-search, I have uncovered the traditional special effects of this performance. The blade used was in fact a very real knife. A real knife would have been required to cut through the tough deer or dog hide. A wooden board or copper armor was created to protect the performers stomach from the sharp blade. The entrails of the animals slaughtered used to represent the entrails of the dancer being cut and were concealed between the armor and the hide. The cutting, screaming and spilling of the entrails would have appeared so genuine that the reality effect created by the traditional special effects of this bladder system would have been a spine tingling spectacle.

This spectacular visual adventure showcased the marvelous power of the Kusiut society and proved it was larger than life, larger than any human alone can ever hope to be and, in my opinion, mirrors Klein's description of the purpose of special effects.

¹³ McIlwraith, T.F. Vol II, p136 "The Bella Coola Indians" University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1948. Print.

¹⁴ McIlwraith, T.F. Vol II, p136 "The Bella Coola Indians" University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1948. Print.

The Bear Dance



Fig. 9

I call upon Harlan I. Smith to share information told to him:

SON OF WILLIE MACK IN COSTUME

"The belief is that a bear spirit enters the performer, impelling him to eat human flesh. At a certain stage of the ceremonial this bear spirit becomes visible as a bear's head. The bear's head is shown in the photograph. Hidden assistants caused the bear's head to vomit blood and pieces of meat. These are considered to be the portions of human flesh, which the performer has eaten. The performer assists the bear's head to vomit these forth by bending down and clutching with his teeth the flesh as it is being vomited forth. Date June 25, 1922."¹⁵

An audience circa 1800 witnessing a bear mask vomiting what was convincingly real human blood and pieces of real human flesh would have no doubt had a horrifyingly emotional reaction. From a technical point of view, I am interested in creating contemporary works of art that reflect these hidden traditional mechanical engineering. Taking this modern special effects lens, I am able to

¹⁵ Tepper, Leslie p. 125 "The Bella Coola Valley: Harlan I. Smith's Fieldwork Photography, 1920 – 1924" Quebec, 1991. Print.

deduce that a flexible container is required to hold the liquid blood with tubes wide enough to pass chunks of meat from the flexible container to an opening on the mask or costume.

Switching from a modern special effects lens to a traditional Nuxalk lens, I consider the materials available to make flexible containers. I know from 20 years of experience as a wool and cedar weaver that baskets are made from the roots or the bark of cedar trees and spruce trees. These may be woven water tight using the spruce roots, however these style of baskets are extremely rigid and would not be suitable for this traditional special effect. A bentwood box can be created to water tight, but would not be flexible enough to thrust forth-bloody liquid filled with pieces of meat.

Another possibility would be the skin of an animal. All parts of animals that were hunted and killed were used to make clothing, jewelry, drums, rattles, and headdresses and it is quite conceivable that animal parts could be used to create a bladder system. This bladder system could be made from the hide and/or internal organs, which could be fitted with a harness or necklace apparatus to be worn by the performer. The intestines would have made perfect tubing system to transport liquids from bladder bag to thrust the bloody pieces of meat out opening.

This traditional special effect not only possesses the cultural value the excavation of this discontinued apparatus, but it may cultivate an enriched breeding ground for experimental mask making and innovative regalia concepts.

Chapter Three: Traditional Special Effects in ACTION

Transmutations: Foam latex mask

I will now move more fully into the new works of art that I created during the time I spent researching traditional special effects in Nuxalk potlatch performances. You will see moments of hybridization—traditional ceremonial objects woven in with modern materials or current technologies to create a new visual language to share my story. I would further suggest that these new works are reflective of my relational ontology with, my lineage, the land I am from, and the

uncanny spiritual coincidences that occurred along this journey. The intertwining of these connections is an undercurrent that propels each new work forward.

The Echo Mask was the source of inspiration for my foam latex facial prosthetic. This foam latex facial prosthetic mask incorporates a Nuxalk form line aesthetic tradition with modern sculpting techniques, mold-making capability and airbrush painting dexterity.

The traditional special effect underpinning the Echo Mask is simply facial expressions. The artist would have carved the primary mask to accommodate the six interchangeable mouthpieces and the mouthpieces would have been carved to fit into the primary mask in a sliding dovetail joint fashion.

During my first year, I enrolled in a special effects makeup school in Vancouver and learned clay sculpting, mold making, life casting, foam latex mixing skills, foam latex curing techniques, facial prosthetic application, special effect airbrushing make up application and removal techniques to create a custom designed foam latex facial prosthetic.



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Foam latex facial prosthetics is a disguise made to cover either the entire head or the face of the actor. Foam latex masks have their origin in theatre and have evolved to film and television. These facial prosthetics are capable of portraying various aspects of creatures including monsters,

zombies, animals, skulls, and other human beings. Northwest Coast peoples have practiced animism, a worldview of non-human entities: animals, plants and inanimate objects possessing a spirit and existing alongside the human realm. I felt that the history of foam latex facial prosthetics in this metaphysical context could provide a seamless transition to new masks.

A traditional Nuxalk mask is typically carved from red cedar, yellow cedar, alder, silver birch and yew woods. They were carved with hand made tools and painted with handmade brushes and pigments made from local minerals and binders. They were adorned with a variety of materials depending on the mask, some adornments include; feathers, shells, cedar bark, hair, fur, leather or hides.



Fig. 13

The foam latex facial prosthetic was part of a larger project. This project included collaboration with Lyle Mack a Nuxalk painter and carver. Lyle Mack carved a wooden transformation mask that would be worn on top of the performer wearing the foam latex facial prosthetic as shown in figure 13 and figure 15.



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

He carved a wooden portrait mask in the Nuxalk style and painted in colors associated with the sun in celebration of this lavish life force. The masculine energy of the sun mask will soon acquiesce, when the mask opens, to the female energy of the interior moon mask and complete the gentle ebb and flow of the infinite transformation cycle.

The interior mask is foam latex facial prosthetic, which is the fruit of seven months of accelerated erudition into unfamiliar territory for my art practice. This facial prosthetic is sculpted with mindful and intentional hands, always honoring my work with smudge prayer and sweat lodge ceremonies. The celestial color choice for the facial prosthetic is a reflection of the spirit of the moon invoking the energies of the night.

Through my art practice and lived experience I was able to consider my assigned gender role and express this within the art objects I created. The *trans*-formation mask collaborative project and *trans*-formation button blanket spoke to an intertwined discourse of gender diversity or gender fluidity within contemporary ceremony. I had the privilege to witness and participate in an unofficial cleansing rite of ceremonial gender roles within my Nation. New allowances for ceremonial gender roles are being formed.

During a youth potlatch performance for Adam Beach in 2014, I had the rare opportunity to witness young female dancers practice and perform our highest mask dances, The Thunder Dance and The Hao Hao Dance. The extraordinary series of events that lead to this chance spectacle came about by the unwillingness of the young boys to perform mask dances for

this particular potlatch. The young girls eagerly stepped forward to volunteer their services and were met with hesitation, but not refusal. The dance instructor paused and did not give a yes or no answer, but instead sought counsel by the eldest female elder in the Nuxalk Nation. Her name is Ama and she was in the hospital at the time. He went to her bedside and share the circumstance with her and asked for guidance. She gave him permission to instruct the young girls on the choreography of both The Thunder dance and The Hao Hao dances.

I witnessed them practice and understood through observation that these dances were very labor-intensive and they worked very hard to execute each movement precisely. During the public performance each young girl performed perfectly. Their performances were met with extreme mixed reviews. Some audience members were outraged at the direct violation of the ceremonial observance of gender roles within mask dancing and loudly proclaimed their disapproval as they exited the hall. Other spectators wept with joy and pride at the impeccable performances of their loved ones and stood clapping enthusiastically. While other audience members sat quietly in awe.

This transcendental juncture in the current events of the Nuxalk Nation inspired me to create an art object that incorporated this event with my re-search of traditional special effects.

These *trans*-formation art works served as a visual dialogue with possible divergences in ceremonial gender roles – to witness a female dance, something I longed to witness since childhood. The Thunder and/or The Hao Hao. These pieces operate as a cultural critique by presenting possibles shifts in contemporary ceremonial gender roles of mask dancing, performance and attitudes of culturally accepted materiality of ceremonial objects.

This illuminates a mis-remembered of historical occurrence of females dancing behind the mask. Ama, the elder who gave permission for the young girls to dance mask, herself danced mask as a young women. She did not disclose the circumstances that surrounded her performance, she only shared that she had danced mask when she was young. The mis-remembering of cultural practices and its further dissemination from generation to generation alters the accepted norms of this particular ceremony with regards to gender

participation. It is through the subtle presentation of female form within a masculine mask that holds space for this issue to be acknowledged.

Strings & Pulley's: *Trans*-formation button blanket

The Nuxalk concept of a puppet performer accompanying the main cultural character parallels the western puppet type known as the hand puppet, most commonly seen in ventriloquism performances. The traditional special effect of a concealed rigging of strings and pulleys with regalia inspired my transformation button blanket.

A button blanket is a flat wool blanket worn as ceremonial regalia that displays ones family crest, which is a social signifier of ancestral lineage. Pre-contact blankets were highly valued hand-woven blankets made from mountain goat fur and cedar bark. I thought about the strings and pulley's that the puppet dancer would have used and how they would have been concealed under the regalia and my creative thoughts moved to the blanket as a puppet – an inanimate regalia coming to life and being activated by the performer wearing the garment.

This was my creative gesture of weaving together two concepts - the traditional special effect of strings and pulley's and a post-colonial ceremonial robe together into one piece my transformation button blanket, which I described and discussed in the coming chapters, but first more on strings and pulley's.

The strings and pulleys of the transformation masks and the puppet-patron inspired my transformation button blanket. A button blanket that transforms from a primary crest to internal secondary crest and is the first of its kind - to my knowledge.



Fig 16



Fig. 17

The *trans*-formational blanket has a primary exterior design and when the performer pulls on the concealed cables the blanket opens French door style to reveal a secondary design. I am interested in the energy of psychologically identifying with the motives, intention and artistic process of the original Kusiut artists who invented and produced the traditional special effects that I am chasing.

I repurposed the technology of strings and pulley's and applied them to a button blanket as shown below. This is an image of the inside view of the transformation button blanket. This view shows the strings and pulleys on both the left and right side of the inside of the Transformation Button Blanket. One set of strings with handles pulls the primary crest open to reveal the secondary crest and the other set of strings with handles pulls the blanket closed. This mimics the ebb and flow of the crests – sun to moon and back again.



Fig. 18

Fire & Lights: Fiber optic headdress

The fire-rattle was the initial spark that mobilized the concept of fiber optic lighting system as a form of modern special effects that could be synthesized with Northwest Coast weaving morphology.

I resolved to pursue an apprentice style internship with Tsimshian weaver William White and Tsimshian carver Melissa Meyer to advance my weaving skills and knowledge base. I constructed a Nuxalk style loom, participate in a thigh spinning workshops and visited Nuxalk woven blankets housed at the Museum of Anthropology and Royal British Columbia Museum. There were unforeseen complications with working under the mentorship of Mr. White and quickly shifted to a self-directed study.

This is a sacred ritual I perform before each project and I don't speak about this lightly or share this aspect of my art practice often. This is a private observance with an informal approach that may or may not include a smudging ceremony, putting tobacco down, or offering a food burning custom. In some cases it may simply consist of taking a few deep breathes with my eyes closed and whispering a prayer. Since I was a small child, I experience very vivid dreamtime journeying and I honor and respect this as part of my non-linear internal spiritual space. One of the blankets I was re-searching was my great grandmothers aunt, Elizabeth Mack. When my mentorship was crumbling and I was getting anxious, she came to me in a dream.

I had a vivid dream of my great grandmother's aunt Elizabeth Mack. She spoke about a photo of her in a robe that is housed at the Museum of Anthropology. She said she didn't remember anything remarkable about the day that photo was taken and that I shouldn't pay too much attention to the blanket itself or the photo of her in the robe. What is important to remember, she said, is that the blanket is an expression of love and what is possible. (The dream took place at my auntie Penny's home. And in it, there was a woman from the spirit world named "Eight-o'clock Rain" who was there to record the Elizabeth's visit).

I returned to my self-directed study with new vigor and examined the materiality of the project and examined the width, length, and physical characteristics of the material I was using, wool. I

shifted thought threads and considered what material in the genre of special effects could mimic wool and I deduced that a fiber optic wire would visually appear equal in width, length, and movement as wool.

I determined this would be a dramatic and intriguing combination, and I was correct. Through this particular process, I had to learn the cultural art form of Nuxalk weaving, which has not been in continuous practiced for 92+ years, and I had to learn a specialized technical system of fiber optic lighting. I had to then devise a way in which these two separate elements could coexist in one art object.

This headdress is connected to a basic control switch that has three settings a) on b) blink c) blink random. For a performance the fiber optic headdress will be connected to a sound activated control switch to blink in time with the drumbeat of the song.



Fig. 19



Fig. 20

The intention behind this piece is to try to utilize modern materials to recapture some of the intense feeling of amazement with the fire rattles. I envision multiple dancers wearing fiber optic headdresses and crests on the button blankets fitted with fiber optic lighting to match that of the headdress. What a spectacle this would be! It is my hope that my re-search and works of art may carve out a new path for First Nation performing arts.

A Matter of Bladder: Purging medicine woman mask

The Bear Dance and the Stomach-Cutting Dance figuratively ripped open the limitation of my preconceived notions of what potlatch performances had been and left me with my own imagined assumptions and excited guesses.

I have not yet witnessed stomach cutting dances with the performer is being cut open spilling guts and blood. I have not yet witnessed dances that showed the dancers heads being cut off. I have not see with my own eyes dances included dancers being drowned on the dance floor. I have not seen performance of a dancers being burned alive during a performance. I have not witnessed a dance that included an elaborate manifestation of Mother Earth giving birth to willow, gooseberry, nettle, grass, skunk cabbage, and other plants and trees. This wondrous state of silent contemplation held space for me to have courage to expand, experiment and create a glass mask that possessed the ability to cry and vomit (purge).

Ceremonial purging is to rid the person's physical body of toxins and to expel any unwanted negative energy or evil spirits. There are five ways a person can purge – to cry, to vomit, to sweat, to urinate and to defecate. For my graduation piece created a purging medicine woman mask.



Fig. 21



Fig. 22

Three works come together in an installation.

The button blanket is made from Milton wool material, a sheet of transparent vinyl and mother of pearl buttons. This transparent button blanket and apron set was created as a visual representation of what we conceal and what we reveal about our erotic self under our cultural protocols?"

The headdress is hand woven in the Nuxalk style with thigh-spun wool and otter fur. Incorporated into the weft weave are fiber optic light strands. These light strands are battery operated.

The glass mask is the result of two years of studio research into conventional FX techniques and materials. The transparency of the mask is a didactic gesture towards unearthing a secret practice within my ancestral ceremonial performance history. I chose glass medium as a way to visually express in the work itself a looking through to understand what is behind. This is an echo from my transparent button blanket, which exposes the human form underneath. I sculpted the masks with tear channels down the cheeks so that when the bladder system was activated the tears had a path to follow. I employed modern mold making techniques to create a lost wax casting, the basis for the transparent glass mask.

The clear harness was a nod at the performer and acknowledges that these pieces were created to withstand the rigors of a performance. The clear vinyl bladder system is my interpretation of how traditional bladder systems could have been fashioned based on my research into stage and film FX techniques.

This installation was the culmination of my first summer intensive study, my second year study and my third year of re-search. All three pieces join together into a full regalia for, The Purging Medicine Woman.

Conclusion

When I spoke about transformation being an integral part of myth sharing and the understanding of the veil between our material world and that of the spirit realm, I had no way of foreseeing that this would also be true of a personal transformation in my life. My physical self, emotional self,

intellectual self, domestic self, creative self and spiritual self have all experiences a transformation through this journey. Through looking back, pushing forward and sitting still I have gathered knowledge of my lineage, my culture, and my way of making that has altered my being in profound and unseen ways. As I bring this portion of my journey to a close, I am overwhelmed with gratitude.

It is in a sacred way that I move to greet my collective cultural past while advancing forward to visually articulate myself. Once I have grounded myself in this manner I am able to reflect on the context of my practice. Similar to the willow branches that form the sweat lodges structure, there are a number of concepts that blanket current First Nations art making. Post-colonial theory has been debated and discussed for decades and one might argue is picking up momentum. These concepts were thick and slow to process for me. I meandered between the concept of decolonization and utopia with a firestorm of inquiries asking, 'Is decolonization possible?' and if it is, 'What does that look like?'

It is through reading Bagele Chilisa¹⁶ that I have come to understand decolonization in simple terms. Chilisa states, "It involves the restoration and development of cultural practices, thinking patterns, beliefs and values that were suppressed but are still relevant and necessary to the survival and birth of new ideas, thinking, techniques, and lifestyles that contribute to the advancement and empowerment of the historically oppressed and former colonized non-Western societies".

For me, decolonization is not about attempting to resuscitate in the era of my great grandmothers and great grandfathers or laying blame on settler peoples. It is about allowing my fore-parents to remain wholly intact within me with all their creative genius, personality quirks and cultural precepts while granting myself permission to learn, practice, question, experiment, fail, succeed and ultimately have a clear, strong, feminine voice within my work.

I had described my practice as balancing delicately between the traditional and contemporary, but now I understand that tradition art practices are always participating in a memory culture. I am inextricably situated in the present participating in a culture that is evolving, that evolving and in

¹⁶ Chilisa, Bagele p. 14 "Indigenous Research Methodologies" (Smith, 1999, 2008) Los Angeles: Sage, 2012. Print.

flux. I feel an imperceptible connection with remembered, mis-remembered and re-remembered sense of the communal. Those connections pull on my thoughts like a *deja vu* or waking dream. My attempts at reclamation have been a painful process but a crucial one.

As a female artist, working through an indigenous re-search paradigm it is inevitable to encounter indigenous feminist theory. For me, this occurred as a young girl asking my aunt when I would be able to dance a mask and not getting a clear answer. It wasn't until decades later that I absorbed what this line of questioning reflected about my culture and my place within it. Women have a respected place within First Nations ceremonies as portals of all life. With this responsibility come specific prerogatives and limited privileges and it also comes with exclusion, segregation and prohibition. This includes our duties and expectations of food preparation, where we may sit within each given ceremony, who we may speak to, which dances we may participate in, when and if we may address the gathering and how we dress our physical bodies. I observed the nuances of gender roles in ceremony at a very young age and I bring threads of these observations to my works today.

The questions that arise from my re-search and the art objects I create are not so much about the socio-political climate that halted the continuum and evolution of traditional special effects. I am not going into colonization, post-colonialism, waves of epidemics, residential schools system, racist federal and provincial legislature, addiction, and so forth. I am not asking why this practice stopped or what current cultural constraints may be applying pressure to its development, but rather I am excited by the possibility of arousing and rekindling the art of traditional special effects through my re-search. I believe that my re-search has the potential to challenge culturally conservative customs and inspire future generations to reach beyond what is acceptable and add to the evolution of our cultural nowness and innovation, as displayed in the story of the Kitkatla War Chief dance.

This re-search hints at a new relationship between reality effects in Northwest Coast traditional ceremonial dances and new modes of cultural production. That could enhance cultural visual story telling in contemporary potlatches. Special effects in film allow directors to explore socio-political commentary of our times that allow audiences a window into the visual dialogue through the reality effect. I hope that my re-search will permit the same venue for active participation in a

cultural critique of contemporary First Nations' societies. Innovations of performance arts help to update humanistic studies and assist to revise classical mythology in film, television and theatre. Through the combination of western special effects and Nuxalk art forms, my thesis proposes possibilities for both genres.

Although, I have experienced some wonderful aha moments in my practice and re-search, I have also been confronted with questions about questions of display. I struggled and was unsuccessful at resolving the question, "If these are performances objects, why aren't they being performed?" My final installation is a collection of ceremonial performance objects displayed in a gallery space.

I was mindful of the cultural protocol regarding masks, songs, regalia and I am not in a position to throw a Potlatch and to bring out a new mask, song, dance and regalia. That is not to say that it can't be done. Through my re-search of the Kusiut, it was clear that not all Kusiut members were performers; to use stage lingo some kusiut were the back stage crew, costume designers, set designers and sound crew and this may provide direction to my own practice.

I deliberately work within an indigenous re-search paradigm that uses holistic protocols when re-searching and formulating a respectful blueprint for an art object. I spoke about the emotional stages I go through to deliver a new work. The first stage is inspiration, building excitement, cultural identity euphoria, cultural responsibility anxiety, personal doubt, elder and/or collective critique panic, personal leap of faith, creative fortitude, exhaustion, gratification and then finally an ebbing of energy in a restorative period. Each stage is relational to people, to land, to the cosmos, ideas and to my selves. Each stage participates in a memory culture. I re-search into ancestral aesthetics, collective memories and my personal memory timeline in the present. In each stage partakes in ceremonial rituals or makes spiritual offerings.

I am honored to have taken this transformative healing journey!

All my relations...

Reference list

Wilson, Shawn. *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Re-search Methods*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2008. Print.

McIlwriath, Thomas Forsyth. *Bella Coola Indians*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948. Print.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIV (1917)." Poetry Foundation, October 13, 2009. Website. April 17th 2014.

Hill and Wang. *Roland Barthes: The Rustle of Language* New York, 1975. Print.

Klein, Norman. *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*. New York: The New Press, 2004. Print.

Pacific Northwest Coast College. Bovee, Katherine. *A New Stage: Norman Klein on the Future of Scripted Spaces*. Vimeo.com/17008887. 4 years ago. Website accessed April 15th 2015.

Tepper, Leslie H. *The Bella Coola Valley: Harlin I. Smith Fieldwork Photographs, 1920 – 1924*. Quebec, 1991. Print.

Chilisa, Bagele. *Indigenous Re-search Methodologies*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2012. Print.