Thieves of the Northwest Coast:

Understanding Native and Non-Native Relations in Clayoquot Sound, 1791-1792

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Introduction

The early histories of interactions on the Northwest Coast abounded with stories of thieving 'savages', failed settlements and conflicts over trades that could have ensured advantages for both settler and Native interests. However, documents that have been used to recount these histories, such as *Voyages of the Columbia to the Northwest Coast 1787-1790 and 1790-1793,* are an incomplete telling of the story.

For this essay I desired to develop a more distinct understanding of the interactions of theft between the Americans on the *Columbia* and the Native people of Clayoquot Sound that are now a part of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation on what is now Vancouver Island. Robert Haswell, the first mate of the *Columbia*, a ship that sailed to the Northwest Coast twice, responded to his first encounter with Natives of the Northwest Coast with "[they are] a smart sett if active fellows but like all others without one exception on this Coast addicted to thefts"[1]. This was the first time that Haswell had ever been to the Northwest Coast. Nevertheless he had a preconceived notion that the Native peoples of this Coast were predisposed to thievery. While I do not believe Haswell's negative generalization about Northwest Coast peoples, I do not hold true the assumption that all sailors did not "hesitate to cheat or to rob [Natives] when they could"[2]. Though, in the end, theft of land and possessions ultimately benefitted the non-Native settlers more than Native peoples, these early narratives identified a significant amount of theft perpetrated by both settler and Native peoples.

These relations of mutual thievery can be used to further highlight the complexities of two very different cultures interacting for the one of the first times. The situations themselves could have been deadly; were driven by socioeconomic factors and confused by cultural differences and languages barriers. Sometimes sailors took food from the surrounding area without understanding that they were stealing from the Native peoples' supply; at others the First

Nations were recorded as blatantly taking European objects as if it were their own. The intentions behind and reactions to these thefts revealed how each cultural group respected different systems of ownership.

Self-Introduction

As a self-identified and recognized Metis person I have attempted to indigenize this process of history with the means there are available to me. This paper represents the final project that a History major must undergo to achieve their Bachelor of Arts. My restrictions were that I had to choose a primary document of the time period, focus mostly on that text and present a fifteen page article within one semester. It is not as if my Metis ancestry simply allows me to write about Native peoples without complication or appropriation. However the fact that I had no prior connection to the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation on top of the circumstances above it would have breached protocol, in my opinion, to approach the Tribal Council of the Nuu-chah-nulth with this project. I do not feel that I was in a suitable position to respectfully record the Nuu-chah-nulth's oral histories and traditions.

I was left to obtain these histories from the restrictive realm of textual documents that is dominated by Eurocentric beliefs and processes. Of course during this research I did not come across a single historian that used oral traditions of the Nuu-chah-nulth to identify, analyze or clarify early contact histories of the Northwest Coast, but more specifically in Clayoquot Sound. Even more recent authors, such as Daniel Clayton, fail to effectively re-establish Native presence, authority and voice in histories of the Northwest Coast. This is because Daniel Clayton is a British man writing a part of the Nuu-chah-nulth people's history without them being directly involved in the process.

Integrating Native oral history into academia will continue to be next to impossible if certain assumptions are upheld by academics and settler society. The assumption that I am most concerned with is that the multitude of nations, languages and cultures stumbled upon by Europeans, in what is now known as the Americas, prior to contact have disappeared. This is untrue. Cultures grow and change. Their histories, worldviews and ideologies have not been lost. Cultural values were upheld, strengthened, and in some cases, adapted for generations through the use of oral history. Yet, despite this strength and resilience, I have been unable to locate oral histories being actively combined with academic productions of native histories. To do so would re-envision the past without relying on Eurocentric documentation. This would have an indigenizing affect on history, by which I mean to facilitate Native perspectives, histories and ideologies into mainstream accounts of the Northwest Coast.

Tsawalk

I was in the same position as Daniel Clayton until I became aware of Umeek's, otherwise known as Richard Atleo, recent book *Tsawalk*. Umeek is of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation who carries his culture's oral histories and traditions simultaneously integrating the Nuu-chah-nulth worldview of *Tsawalk* into the arena of academia. To honor Nuu-chah-nulth culture and oral histories and to equalize the Eurocentric documentation used in this paper, I will incorporate *Tsawalk* to inform my analytical approach.

Tsawalk is not only an ideology, but an analytical methodology. Umeek refers to the concept of *Tsawalk* as "a unity, or meaningful interrelationship, between all variables of existence."[3] By accepting the world as irreversibly interrelated one must also accept that a single explanation for anything is impossible. Since *Tsawalk* respects both physical and metaphysical realms of reality it recognizes the relationship between physical and spiritual bodies. Umeek

suggests that while the metaphysical part of life may be difficult to describe, it can be acknowledged through practice and ceremony[4].

In addition, and related, to the practice of *Tsawalk* is *isaak*, the respect for all living things, which is "predicated upon the notion that every life form has intrinsic value and that this should be recognized through appropriate protocols of interaction."[5] Umeek explains that the wolf shows respect for the deer by not tearing out its innards after a kill; he states the Nuu-chah-nulth hunter does the same while hunting deer to practice *isaak* [6]. These protocols ensure a very specific relationship with the environment, people and their corresponding spiritual importance. *hahuulthi*, or ancestral territory, was closely related to the practice of *isaak*. It is a way to respect individual's inheritance of the land from their ancestors and is linked to managing it according to *isaak*[7]. It is important to understand that these ideologies are neither stagnant nor widespread across all Nuu-chah-nulth peoples. All societies have individuals who do not follow dominant social rules and Umeek recognizes in his analysis that these rules can be broken by Nuu-chah-nulth people both in the past and present.

Umeek develops *Tsawalk* as an academic analytical tool. The pattern of *Tsawalk* actually demands "more rather than fewer variables"[8] during critical examination of any study. In contrast to the empirical disciplines of Western academia, such as History, which tend to function by absorbing an acceptable amount of reliably, recognized information and then producing a framework of fact that leads the audience to a final thematic conclusion. This is an alternative to accepting the notion that life, and History, abounds with more meaning than historians could ever hope to decipher. By applying *Tsawalk* to a Western discipline, in this case History makes it necessary to avoid concluding any research with definitive statements. In these situations it becomes more important to establish the meaning of these connections rather than

identify their purpose. Until the completion of integrating Native oral histories into current narratives of the early Northwest Coast these histories will always be incomplete. In the mean time I attempt to embrace the theory of *Tsawalk* in analyzing the relationships between Nuu-chah-nulth and sailors at 'Adventure Cove' in the 18th century to further complicate, rather than simplify, the interlocking connections between culture, intention and situation.

My desires are threefold in this article: First I wish to use the Eurocentric histories of relationships between Nuu-chah-nulth and sailors on the Columbia during the winter of 1792 to present the formulaic foundation of Eurocentric history. Then I hope to indigenize the process of this history by conducting analysis through the Nuu-chah-nulth ideology of *Tsawalk*. Finally by not adhering to the basic methods of analysis I will expand rather than diminish the possible conclusions of the circumstances which further indigenize the process of essay writing that I have been trained in as an undergraduate university student.

European Narratives

Compiled by Frederic W. Howay in 1941 *Voyages of the Columbia to the Northwest Coast 1787-1790 and 1790-1793* included all known logs, journals, correspondences and lists of materials that pertained to these two voyages of the *Columbia*. These accounts and letters both received and sent from the *Columbia* were mainly written by three men: John Boit, the fifth mate, Robert Haswell, the first mate and John Hoskins, the clerk. These journeys began only four years after the creation of the United States of America. With the success of the Revolutionary War in 1783 these newly founded Americans made first contact in the Northwest Coast on behalf of the United States of America.

The sails of the Columbia were hoisted for the second time on August 15th, 1791 and left Boston with a ship full of American men led by Captain Gray with the instructions that "no

unjust advantage taken of [the Natives] in trade"[9]. The Columbia's first visit to the Northwest Coast met with financial failure. This time economic success was absolutely necessary for Captain Gray as he had purchased shares in the ships venture[10]. Additionally, this journey warranted more national importance than the previous as George Washington, then president of the United States, wrote permission for Captain Robert Gray that asked foreign nations to receive the Captain "upon [him] paying the usual expenses"[11] of travel and trade.

These journals only began once the Americans reached this coast, but the Clayoquot Sound area was a hotly contested political arena even before the *Columbia* arrived. By the time of contact Chief Wickananish had already merged eleven to seventeen different Nations into the Clayoquots[12]. Under his command they annihilated the Hisau'istaht Nation. Their territories, trade privileges and war allies were redistributed between the remaining three Tribes: the Ohqmin, the Hohpitshaht and the Nuu-chah-nulth [13]. Opitsat was chosen as the winter settlement for the recently empowered Nuu-chah-nulth people[14]. By John Boit's account Opitsat "contained upwards of 200 houses"[15] making it the largest settlement on the west coast of what is now known as Vancouver Island[16].

By September 1792 the *Columbia* had arrived on the Pacific Northwest Coast as the temperatures in began to drop. The ocean became a choppy, dangerous place and Haswell suggested to Captain Gray that they should find the closest suitable cove to winter over[17]. The general plan was to construct the ship named the *Adventurer* which was placed aboard the *Columbia* before the journey began. The Captain agreed and they harbored in a small cove which they fittingly founded as 'Adventure Cove'[18]. Gray chose this cove knowing full well that a large Nuu-chah-nulth winter village, called Opitset, laid only 3 miles away[19].

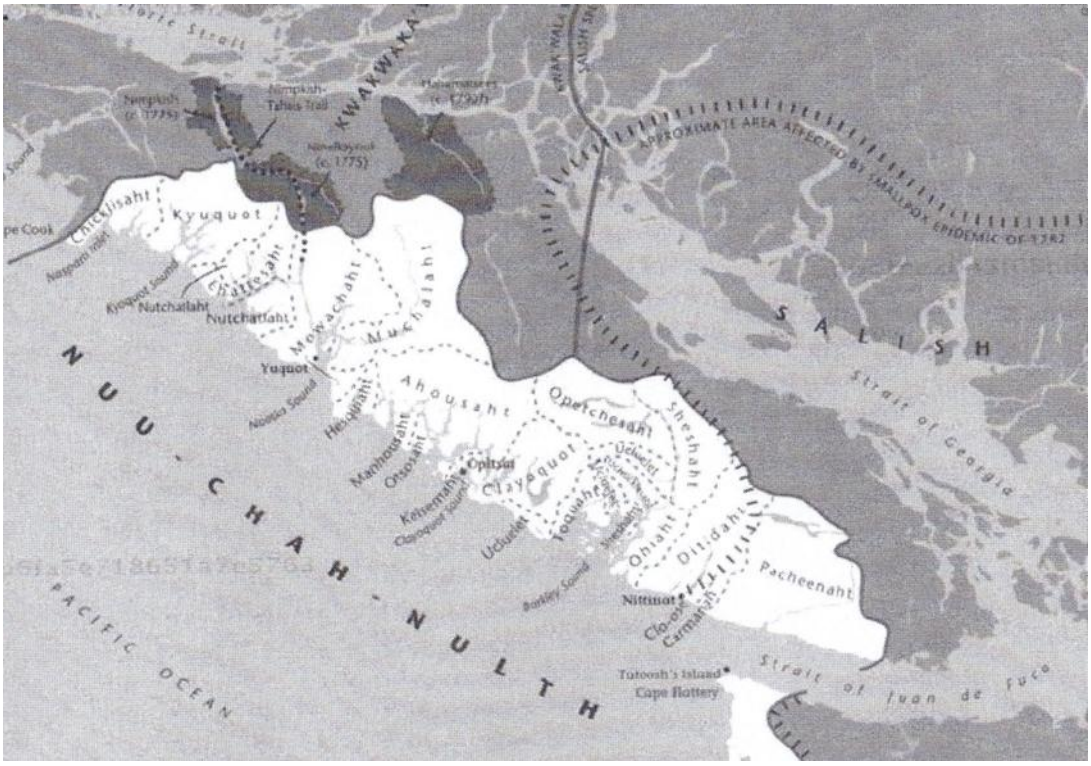


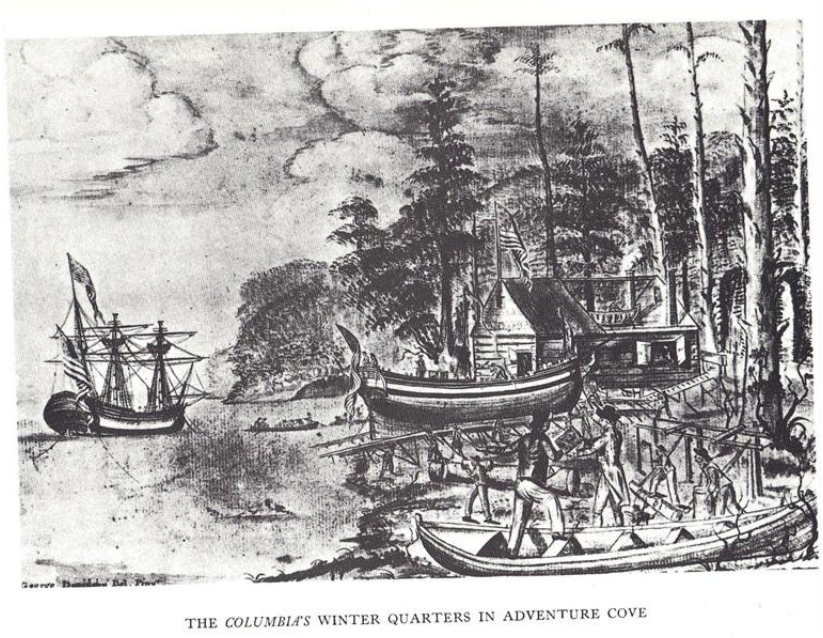
Fig.2 Selection from the map found in Daniel Clayton's *Islands of Truth*[20].

Upon contact with the Columbia, Chief Wickananish was in the process of strengthening his political power in the region. Around 1789 the Nuu-chah-nulth began to demonstrate their military power to the people to the south in what is now known as the Barclay Sound[21]. Anything from raids to complete destruction of settlements was commonplace[22]. Weaponry that may have come from Russian, Spanish or other European settlements aided the aggressors in these wars. Chief Wickananish requested that Haswell "allow the smiths to make daggers to kill the Highshakt people"[23]. Boit also mentioned how Wickananish "wish'd for us to lend them musketts and ammunition"[24]. To the north of Clayoquot Sound was a formidable Nation, the Ahousaht of Nootka Sound. Chief Wickananish's tactics changed from war to diplomacy and the Nuu-chah-nulth began negotiations to etch out trade and territory agreements in that area[25].The mediation was facilitated by marriage links between Wickananish and the Ahousaht Chief, Tatoosh[26]. There were also feasts to honor the Chiefs of Ahousaht when they arrived in Opitset[27].

Between the diplomacy in the north and military control over the south the Nuu-chah-nulth people had a monopoly over the fur trade in one of the wealthiest areas of the Northwest Coast. When the Columbia arrived in 1972 Chief Wickananish controlled most all relations with the American ship.

Chief Wickananish visited the American sailors a month after their arrival in early October 1792. By that time they had already finished constructing a "house" equipped with "two cannon[s] mounted" and room enough for men, arms and food[28]. To complete their projects a "quantity of timber"[29] needed to be cut, not to mention the daily eating habits of each man. "20 or 30 ducks and geese"[30] were an average yield of a day's hunt. The sailors of the *Columbia* did not recognize these lands as occupied by the nearby settlements. During a hunting expedition John Boit, the ships fifth mate, found himself approached by Ahousaht men who shouted and waved at him. He believed that they were trying "to take his cartridge box"[31]. Boit responded by pointing his musket at Chief Tatooch of Ahousaht until the Native men returned to their canoes[32]. Haswell agreed with Boit's assumption that the Native people "intentions were only to rob"[33] reiterating the belief that *all* Natives of the Northwest Coast were thieves.

Boit began to refer to Chief Wickananish as "the King"[34] after experiencing his wealthy home. Yet, Captain Gray did not show similar respect for the Chief. One of the few times Captain Gray visited the settlement of Opitset was when another Chief had fallen ill and he revived him with some Western medecines[35]. Yet this event took place in late December, three months after the Americans arrived on Nuu-chah-nulth territory. Gray never exchanged presents with the Chief of the Nuu-chah-nulth, which was protocol for arriving upon most Native territories on the Northwest Coast[36]. Also, Captain Gray was not with John Boit when he witnessed Chief



THE *COLUMBIA'S* WINTER QUARTERS IN ADVENTURE COVE

Fig 1. European illustration of Clayoquot Sound and Fort Defiance[37].

Wickananish's eldest sons naming ceremony[38]. The fact that the American leader did not show respect for the Nuu-chah-nulth leader was a cultural and political insult.

With tension building another event aboard the *Columbia* turned the American- Nuu-chah-nulth relationship for the worse. On February 18th, 1792 Chief Tototeescosettle, Wickananish's brother, was found wearing a sailors overcoat and was accused of theft[39]. The same day another sailor on the *Columbia* confessed that Totoocheatocose, the brother of Tototeescosettle, had propositioned him to aid the Clayoquots in capturing the *Columbia* and in return he would receive a noble standing among them[40]. Captain Gray reacted defensively and repositioned the ship away from the shore, arming all weapons both on the ship and in the fort[41]. Two days later Tototeescosettle returned with his father "to sell his skins", but Captain Gray "took the skins from him" and threatened his life[42]. In Boit's opinion these furs given to Captain Gray after the debacle of the stolen jacket was a "most specious [show] of friendship,"[43] but Gray took the furs and threatened the lives of these chiefs if they returned. Within the week the

Americans had stripped the 'house' of everything useful and steered the *Adventurer* and *Columbia* out of 'Adventure Cove' and away from Nuu-chah-nulth territory back toward the Pacific Coastal Ocean.

Nevertheless the Americans escaped and nothing came of the assumed plan. Before departing, however, Captain Gray ordered his sailors "to destroy the Village of Opitsatah"[44]. Hoskins and Boit both lamented the destruction of this "Work of Ages"[45], as Boit called it, but Haswell's narrative had no mention of this order or the annihilation of Opiset. Gray's aggressive reaction was not in direct response to a military threat as nothing came of this apparent plan, but personal choice.

Intentions and Conclusions

Captain Gray and Robert Haswell's intentions played an important role in how they acted towards the Nuu-chah-nulth. Before the journey Captain Gray chose to invest in the *Columbia* and now was fiscally at stake if it did not profit. Furthermore the owner, Joseph Barrel, enticed them by allowing both "[Gray] five per cent… [and Haswell] one and one-half per cent"[46] of the ships hold for procuring their own goods. A Captains portion from a prosperous mission was already enough to retire[47]. Yet, the owner now gave both the Captain and the first mate incentive to make sure theirs was a successful voyage.

The economic incentives were paired with counsel to act justly toward Native peoples. Not only had a letter from the President of the United States warned against mistreatment of Native people, but so too did the owner of the ship. Barrel threatened to punish breach of contract "with the utmost severity" [48]. Or these admonishments from Barrel may have served as a warning for Captain Gray not to record any mistreatment of Native peoples in official documents. At sea the Captain held omniscient power over the ship, its holdings and its

crew[49].There was no need for Barrel to be told how the voyage was a success as long as it was that.

There are many discrepancies between Haswells log and the other two accounts of the events that transpired over the *Columbia*'s six month stay at Adventure Cove. This may be because Haswell was told by Captain Gray not to record any incriminating evidence. As second in command it was likely that Haswell's journal was the official log of the *Columbia.* Hoskins candid statements about the event in question suggested that he was at ease criticizing Captain Gray's actions. The extent of Hoskins journal was a twenty-four page narrative during the six month stay in 'Adventure Cove' while Haswell only wrote six. Furthermore Haswell did not mention the destruction of the Native village, Opitset, while both Boit and Hoskins do. Likewise Captain Gray's communications with John Barrel did not include anything about their encounter with Chief Wickananish. Hoskin's letter to Barrel was blatantly ambiguous about the entire event. He claimed they were almost finished building a house and the *Adventurer* was nearly complete "when the natives on the 18th of February came to attack us."[50] The house was finished in October of the previous year. His personal account of the event was not only much different, but it even openly criticized Captain Gray's dealings with the Clayoquot[51]. Hoskins was possibly taken aside by Gray and Haswell and forced to change his story before sending the letter.

It is clear that Chief Wickananish was in political conflict with other Nations over land and trade disputes. As a leader Wickananish saw that the weapons and ships of the Americans could tip the scale of war in their advantage against the peoples to the South or other contesting groups. Additionally he was obstructed from acquiring these tools through trade because the Americans did not allow their blacksmiths to make them weapons nor were muskets and shots to

be traded for furs. This alone may have warranted frustration, enough for Wickananish to plan an aggressive takeover of the ship and its property.

The resources taken by the Americans during their stay on Nuu-chah-nulth territory were another reason for aggressive reactions from Native people. According to *isaak* Nuu-chah-nulth people had a responsibility to respect the animals, plants, peoples and spirits of the lands. Chief Tatooch of Ahousaht had reason to react aggressively after his *hahuulthi,* or ancestral hunting ground, was used by the Americans. When he attempted to intervene he was threatened with violence. There were multiple levels of disrespect that could have been perpetrated by Boit: he hunted on Ahousaht land without request, the method of hunting and harvesting may not have been according to *isaak* and Boit aggressed the owner of the area when he tried to stop them. To insult a chief and then threaten his life may have been grave enough to incur a direct attack by Chief Tatooch and the Ahousat Nation with or without the aid of Chief Wickananish and the Nuu-chah-nulth.

It is difficult to compare both how the Americans or how the Native people practiced hunting and harvesting as there were not many of these events described. The few examples of ceremonial procedure, or *isaak*, described how the Nuu-chah-nulth "rub their face with a piece of [snake]"[52] before they embarked on a whale hunt. Another example was that when Nuu-chah-nulth people brought wood to the Americans it was "split with wedges from the Log"[53] this practice does not necessitate chopping the entire tree down or stripping it of all limbs. In stark contrast the image of 'Adventure Cove' (Fig. 1) showed the trees stripped of all their limbs assumedly by the Americans. This was one direct example of how the American methods of collecting resources differed from the Nuu-chah-nulth. However, within a Nuu-chah-nulth

perspective the two transgressions, stealing and harvesting without practicing *issak*, were inseparable according to *Tsawalk* all relationships were interconnected.

It was likely that a Chief of such affluence and authority as Wickananish would respond negatively to insult and inconvenience. However, there was no conclusive evidence that Chief Wickananish or the Clayoquot were ever involved in the planned attack of the *Columbia* or that there was an attack at all. Noble marriages have been used by all cultures to unite factions and gain important allies. It was as likely that the brothers of Wickananish were Chiefs from other Nations that had entirely different intentions than Wickananish. These factions could have acted separately or together with Chief Wickananish or possibly in total secrecy and disobedience. The politics of any society were difficult to navigate and the politics of the Northwest Coast were no different.

If all relationships were important under the belief of *Tsawalk*, to the Nuu-chah-nulth then the visitors who interacted with their land, resources and people were equally significant as their own. The Clayoquot could have considered the American's actions as theft, but permitted it. The Americans, in essence, were a part of *Tsawalk* just as the Clayoquot and needed warmth, sustenance and protection that the cove provided. In the end the possibility of an attack may have resulted from Captain Gray threatening the life of Chief Tototeescosettle and less to do with the taking of any resources.

What is important to note is that the American narratives did not depict a single successful theft perpetrated by the Nuu-chah-nulth over the entirety of their stay. Chief Tatooch's guards were not able to take the box of munitions snatched at John Boit's belt, the sailor's overcoat was returned and the plan to take over the *Columbia* and *Adventure* did not succeed. Yet, failed attempts at 'thefts' performed by Native peoples were more likely to be

recorded throughout the journals of the Columbia. By consistently depicting Native peoples as thieves in these narratives, the Americans positioned themselves as upright and moral. This not only degraded the representation of Native people in Western society, but allowed for the misconduct of the sailors of the *Columbia* to continue. The *Voyage of the Columbia* was just one beginning of the appropriation and misrepresentation of Native history in the Northwest coast through written language.

John Boit and Captain Gray's reaction to the 'theft' of a munitions belt and overcoat were exemplary of their belief in private property. Yet, upon closer analysis this belief in ownership was only recognized by the Americans when European powers were involved. The cove that the *Columbia* wintered in was near Opitset, but was not considered owned by the Nuu-chah-nulth people. However, the Americans were commanded not even to touch the Spanish settlement of Nootka Sound[54]. John Barrel had never been to the Northwest Coast, but even he insinuated Native ownership of the land when he told the Captain of the *Columbia* to purchase the land from them. Economic benefit fueled the American decision to ignore Native peoples' ownership, but the underlying Western assumption that Native peoples were lesser than Europeans would have presumably played an important role. Either way, it was unlikely that the Americans were totally ignorant of Nuu-chah-nulth ownership since the crew of the *Columbia* went to such ends to conceal the events during the winter of 1792 to avoid punishment from John Barrel.

It was made clear to Captain Gray and Haswell that a successful voyage meant significant wealth for the both of them. The enticement was enough for them to falsely depict the Nuu-chah-nulth as thieves, knowingly and unknowingly steal from them and then lie about their encounters upon their return. Was this purely to become rich, to slight Native peoples or both? While men like Captain Gray did not practice *Tsawalk* it was likely that these foul deeds had a relationship

with honorable notions. The life of a sailor was dangerous, unpredictable and took them away from their family for years at a time. The promise of wealth extended by Barrel could have been enough for Captain Gray to become a businessman at home with his wife and four daughters[55]. While this may be admirable in a way, it was based primarily on selfish individualism and racist tendencies that committed horrible actions towards the Nuu-chah-nulth people that, in some ways, have been perpetuated to this day.

It is clear that I have not completely succeeded in analyzing these Eurocentric histories through the Nuu-chah-nulth worldview of *Tsawalk*, I did not expect to, but I have attempted to complicate privileged telling of the events at Adventure Cove during the winter of 1792-93. The histories of the world have been reshaped and redeveloped by the same Western peoples and through the same Western methodologies continuously. To truly begin to unpack the full history of early contact on Pacific edge of what is now considered North America a Native oral tradition must first be integrated. History should no longer be a monolith of evidence that obscures the multiplicity of a people's history.

Endnotes

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