

WHAT MIGHT I LIKE MY KIDS TO LEARN ABOUT LIFE?: IN SEARCH OF “TRADITION”

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ABSTRACT

This personal exploration of “tradition” started after my father died, an event which sparked a series of inner conversations about being a son, being a parent, and the learning that happens over generations. What do I mean by “tradition”? What kinds of conversations would I like the term to open up for me? If I were to consider it as a signpost, what conversations, communities, and contexts might it point to? I work to clarify what “tradition” can mean for me, outlining a wish-list of the aspects I would like my own understanding of “tradition” to encompass. I highlight two common approaches to “tradition” I would like to steer away from: “tradition” as prescriptive-invariance, and “tradition” as resource management. I offer a personal-is-political account of “tradition” to open up analytic opportunities, as I seek to make more appropriate sense of learnings, relationships, and death.

KEYWORDS: tradition • learning • family • responsibility • death

Our study must push beyond things to meanings, and grope through meanings to values. Study must rise to perplex and stand to become part of a critical endeavour. We study others so their humanity will bring our own into awareness, so the future will be better than the past. (Glassie 1995: xiv)

PERSONAL PROLOGUE

I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing (Heaney 1966).

My father passed away last year. As I think on his passing, I find myself reaching out to understand what it has meant to be a son. What it still means. I find myself searching for words to express what I learned from the man I loved as a friend and mentor. I look for ways to speak about those things that I hold dear. I try to find better words to talk about the helpful things I have learned in the company of my parents, my family, my friends. I wonder how to think more clearly about the things I love about life. I wonder how to

make sense of those ways of being human that I would hope any future kids of mine to learn about. I find myself looking for ways to speak of learnings, unlearnings, and relearnings. I find myself looking for ways to speak of the connections and the distances that persist between me and others, the play of influences in our lives, the ways we can always-already make a difference. It seems to me that "tradition" is a notion that may well be suited to speak of such things.

I remember talking to the accordion player Billy McComiskey about his sense of tradition, about why playing his accordion with those tunes, in those ways, was so important to him. "It gives me dignity against oppression," he said, "It keeps me warm at night." That made sense to me. Another time I was chatting over a drink with a couple of women from County Clare about the bitterness of a copyright dispute over tune ownership in Irish traditional music. The elder of the two, likely in her seventies, got very emotional, almost to the point of tears, as she struggled to express how wrong it all felt to her, saying, "It bites to the core of what it's all about." That made sense to me, too. These are people for whom the notion of "tradition" means something. I want it to continue to mean something for me. Or, to put it another way, there are people, values, and things in my life that mean something, that are important to me, that strengthen me in my sense of who I am and how I relate, and I think "tradition" is one of those words (among many) that can allow me to speak and think more clearly about this. "Tradition" is a word that can open up conversations I want to be part of.

Or is it? As much as "tradition" feels right to me on a deep, emotional level, I am aware of the shadowy, grappling gravities of certainty, ritual, obligation, belonging, memory, community, blood, and nation that come with my own and others' understandings of "tradition", and they leave me suspicious. "Tradition" can wield considerable emotional power; I have learned to identify those places of strongest emotion within myself and to start my questioning there. I have come across uses of the term that make me angry; "tradition" and "traditional" can be easily deployed as ways to sanctify, segregate, categorise, denigrate and exclude. I have come across uses of the term that leave me cold, satisfying the exigencies of academic analysis, allowing for grand, abstract statements that seem to have little connection to the lives of real people. I have come across uses of "tradition" that satisfy the bluster of rhetoricians, meaning little beyond the demands of a soundbite.

With all of my suspicions and misgivings, though, I keep coming back to "tradition". I keep returning to clarify, to re-articulate, to grapple with meanings of the term, because I have a feeling there is something valuable there. The notion of "tradition", at least in the English language, tends to be deployed academically in the company of verbal shadow-play concerning, among other things, identity, everyday life, customs, community, intergenerational relationship, and social change. That said, how has the notion of "tradition" become so marginalised within the social sciences and humanities? How has it happened that many understandings of "tradition" have become so profoundly depoliticised that they are frequently considered to offer little of relevance to social and political thought? How is it that folklore studies and ethnology are not explicitly considered co-extensive with sociology? Is there something inherent in the notion of "tradition" that leaves it ill-suited as an analytic term for social and political analysis? I would think not, but it seems to be a bit of an uphill battle.

In thinking about "tradition", I take inspiration from other people who write from

various perspectives in feminisms, anarchisms, anthropologies, postmodernisms, post-structuralisms, and postcolonialisms as they struggle to reconfigure their experiences of meaning, writing against the grain of sedimented orthodoxies (for example, Foucault 1972; 1980; 1990; 1991; Cixous 1980; Hooks 1989; Stoller 1989; 1997; Flax 1992; Behar 1996; Smith 1999; Heckert 2005; Graeber 2007). So many institutionally legitimated perspectives continue to encode deeply misrepresentative and enclosing understandings of what it might mean to be human. So many of the workaday notions that we leave unchallenged invite us, persuade us, to be less than we can be. So many of the ways of thinking we accept as adequately descriptive of our worlds and our experiences come from deeply partial perspectives that are not truly resonant with our own; perspectives that distance us from the possibilities of our lives even as we use them to live those lives.

IN SEARCH OF "TRADITION"

We can always become more accountable and responsible for our uses of the term "tradition", and for our processes of "traditioning". I'm very fond of something that *Sunday Business Post* journalist Tom McGurk once wrote, in the context of a discussion of the term "traditional": "While it doesn't matter what you call it, it does matter what it is supposed to mean" (1995: 25). In inviting more accountability and responsibility it helps to start with myself. What do I mean by "tradition", if I am going to use it at all? What are the qualities of attitude and relationship that are implied by my particular deployments of "tradition" as a term? What kinds of conversations would I like the term to open up for me? If I were to consider it as a signpost, what conversations, communities, and contexts might it point to?

Theoretically, "tradition" might be considered a messy tool to work with. It is easy to fall into semantic defeatism. Shanklin writes: "Like culture, the term tradition has been used so often and in so many contexts that, as Shils (1971) suggests, it may not have any meaning at all" (Shanklin 1981: 86). The complaint that "tradition" suffers from an irremediable surfeit of meanings, from that dreadful academic disease of polyvalency (Ben-Amos 1984: 125), doesn't concern me much here – I assume that multiple meanings will be an issue wherever there are multiple people, which I hope is pretty much everywhere. McDonald (1997: 47) has noted that a number of scholars would be keen to be rid of the term "tradition" altogether, eager to claim that the term has little heuristic value, declaring that the notion of "tradition" leaves us with little room for sustained and sustainable analyses.

I'm not ready to give up on it altogether, though. In this essay I am "in search of 'tradition'." I am exploring the notion to come to an understanding that for me will be personal, meaningful, and analytically helpful. I want to be able to work with an understanding of "tradition" that allows me to make sense of my relationship with my father and his death as much as it helps me to make sense of the conversations, communities, and contexts of, say, "Irish traditional music". I want to be able to think of the notion of "tradition" as a way to ground myself in socially responsible action, as a way to facilitate thoughtful analysis and political engagement, as others have explored (for example, among many, Abrahams 1993; Glassie 1993; 1995; Mills 1993; Paredes 1995; Siikala et al. 2004).

Lynne Tirrell has written: "When women try to articulate our lives, what we try to give is more like an account than a definition. We try to tell true stories about who we are, what we know, what the world has been like for us, and what we would like to see it become." (1993: 11) In a similar sense, I do not seek to offer a definition of "tradition" here, but rather present a brief account of my attempts to use the term "tradition" as a catalyst for thinking about social action and social interaction. I try to think about definitions as descriptions of *some* uses of a term (offered by particular people in particular places), not prescriptions for *all* uses (applicable to all people in all places). I suppose this article is more the beginnings of a project of clarification and self-explanation. I am not interested in what "tradition" is. I am interested in what "tradition" can mean.

A WISH-LIST

My clarification process rides the tension between the questions, "What's important to me?" and, "What would I like to be important to me?" In this spirit, I have compiled a wish-list for my understanding of the term "tradition". This list gives some indication of the conversational work that I would like my understanding of "tradition" to perform.

I join Dell Hymes (1975) in thinking of "tradition" as rooted in social life, in noting that the "traditional" can begin with the personal. I like it when Barry McDonald writes, "I consider tradition to be a human potential that involves personal relationship, shared practices, and a commitment to the continuity of both the practices and the particular emotional/spiritual relationship that nurtures them" (McDonald 1997: 60). I join Craig Calhoun when he asks that "we go still further beyond the Enlightenment's historicist opposition of tradition to modernity and see tradition as grounded less in the historical past than in everyday social practice" (1983: 888).

I'd like to work with an understanding of "tradition" that can be always-already ethical. I don't mean in terms of absolutes of right and wrong, or in terms of moral authority. I mean ethical in the sense that we can become more accountable and responsible for our part in the play of influences in each other's lives. What can we learn from any situation with regard to what it might mean to be human, and with regard to the context of witness in which we always-already operate? How might an understanding of "tradition" open up conversations about the personal as the political? (for example, Peavey 1986; 2000; Langellier 1989; Ritchie 1993; Mauzé 1997; Lee 2007).

It is in this sense that I'd like my understanding of "tradition" to facilitate broad discussions about different qualities of learning, education, and pedagogy. "Tradition" can open up conversations about the constitution and co-construction of social identities. On the one hand, I would like my understanding of "tradition" to leave the door open for discussions of "symbolic violence" and "pedagogic authority" (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990), and of the control, legitimation, and institutionalisation of objectified meanings (Berger, Luckmann 1966). On the other, I'd like my understanding of "tradition" to invite me into conversations about possibilities of transformative learning, including feminist pedagogy (for example, Luke, Gore 1992; Stone, Boldt 1994), critical pedagogy (for example, Illich 1971; Freire 1998), local and informal education (for example, Smith 1994), and anarchist pedagogy (for example, Jensen 2004; Hern 2008).

I'd like to join Henry Glassie in thinking that "tradition" can open up a conversation about learning and futures, and about relationships with those who have passed, those who are here, and those who are yet to come:

It is a rich word, lacking an exact synonym, naming the process by which individuals simultaneously connect to the past and the present while building the future. So tradition can label the collective resource, essential to all creativity, and in adjective form it can qualify the products of people who keep faith with their dead teachers and their live companions while shaping their actions responsibly. (Glassie 1993: 9)

Glassie offers no definition here, and I think that's the point. In my experience, defining tends to close conversations down, and what Glassie is trying to do here is open a conversation, announce what might be considered an ecological orientation – Glassie's conversation about "tradition" is also a conversation about distinctly interconnected and helpful relationships.

For Barre Toelken, too, "tradition" seems to speak to the differences that the past, the pre-present, can make on our present, personal lives: "*Tradition* is here understood to mean not some static, immutable force from the past, but those pre-existing culture-specific materials and options that bear upon the personal tastes and talents" (1996: 10). Implicit in this is the continuation of such a process in future lives. But Toelken's understanding of "tradition" here doesn't require that "tradition" be considered always-already helpful or salutary.

I don't want to find myself in a situation where I champion "tradition" as an unqualified good, and neither do I wish to denigrate "tradition" as an unqualified bad. In any particular context of use, I'd like to lift up the term and look underneath it, to gauge the attitudes and meanings experienced by the people concerned. I'd like my understanding of "tradition" to remain context-sensitive, something perhaps most notably invited by Paredes and Bauman's collection *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* (1972). Another way of saying this is that I'd like my conversations about "tradition" to remain always-already 'peopled', with a wish that they would actively let me work against depeopling abstractions.¹

I'd like to eschew discussions about "tradition" that come without contextual or adjectival qualifiers. Adjectives can uncover the attitudes behind meanings, and can thereby uncover the presence and participation of people in the construction and maintenance of particular understandings of "tradition". In mind of Ben-Amos (1971), I want to ask: What kinds of "tradition"? Whose "traditions"? When? Where? How? Why? With what effects? Without an understanding of "tradition" that involves people, psychologies, interactions, and relationships, it would be hard for me to make sense of my own life in terms of "tradition" at all.

In this sense, I want to work with an understanding of "tradition" that leaves me nowhere to hide. I want to work with an understanding of "tradition" that challenges me to remain transparent to myself in my specificity. Can it invite me to consider the quality of relationships that I experience with others? Can it support me in considering the ways I or others influence each other or always-already make a difference? Can it sink me deep into conversations about consequences and effects of power? Importantly, can it make visible aspects of life that I or others might wish to suppress, deny, denigrate, or silence?

I want to work with an understanding of “tradition” that keeps conversations open enough to encompass the whys and wherefores of “traditions of hate”, “traditions of prejudice”, and “traditions of killing”. It is important that the more toxic possibilities of being human are included in the discussions that “tradition” can open up. Does it make sense to celebrate such practices (for example, militarism) because they are “traditional”, and thereby inherently good? Should we treat them with a casually descriptive empiricism, and bask in the glow of academic self-satisfaction? I don’t want my understandings of “tradition” to immunise me against consideration and critique of our most toxic possibilities. The notion of “tradition” is of little use to me in scholarly analysis unless it can prise open the cans of worms, provide a GPS location device for the elephants in our rooms, and support and encourage the wisdom of the child who proclaims the nakedness of the emperor.

WORDS OF CAUTION

Dan Ben-Amos (1984: 118), following Richard Bauman, draws attention to the ways that the agencies of “tradition” are often located somewhat externally to human beings and human relationships, as conversations about independent, reified forces and forms. There are two workaday approaches to “tradition”, in this regard, that I will remain cautious about. The first is the use of discourses of resource management in descriptions and explanations of “tradition” and processes of “tradition”. The second is the common characterisation of “tradition” as prescriptive invariance. Resource-management and prescription-invariance approaches to “tradition” do us few favours, serving to depoliticise the conversational terrain, and fostering and facilitating damagingly reductionist stories about what it might mean to be human.

Resource Management

Notwithstanding the subtleties of multidisciplinary conversations about “tradition” (see, for example, Fisher 1993; Bronner 2000; MacDougall 2004; King-Dorset 2008), resource management discourses still constitute a very common class of conversations about “tradition” in academic writing (see, for example, Vansina 1965; 1985; Shils 1981; Honko 1991).² Metaphors, allegories, and narratives of identification, delivery, passing on, handing on, inheritance, collection, containment, extraction, use, access, control, ownership, allocation, storage, inventory, preservation, adaptation, and dissemination abound (see, for example, Grieve, Weiss 2005). “Tradition” in such conversations can easily come to be thought of in terms of transactable, storable, or manipulable units or commodities.

Subsequently, resource management conversations about “tradition” tend to fit snugly into the conduit metaphors (Reddy 1979) of communication models of “transmission”. “Transmission”, in many of these formulations, can well be reconsidered as one-way (primarily intergenerational) transactions, whereby people become merely the conduits for the more or less efficient delivery of knowledge from the past to the present and on to the future.

In my reckoning, resource management approaches to “tradition” tend to embed clunky metaphors that may well be fine for casual conversation but which can be quite misleading if naturalised in the process of analysis. In very basic terms, I wouldn’t say that anything ever passes across space between people when we are talking about songs, tunes, poems, stories, or knowledge. To say that there is something that is “passed on” seems to act as metaphorical shorthand for a far more subtle process of learning and presence and interpersonal alignment that takes place. But to stay with the shorthand, to accept the notion of “passing on” as a naturalised description of transactions, seems to me to invite limits to our imaginings about learning contexts, and also of the possibilities of “tradition”. “Passing on” or “handing on” seem to merely embed an acknowledgement of connectedness without leaving much analytic space for the qualities of that connectedness. This is not necessarily the case, of course; there are many people who live richly connected lives for whom “tradition” as “passing on” makes a lot of sense, and there have been many studies grounded in notions of “transmission” and “passing on” that provide rich socio-cultural analysis (for example, Coy 1989).³ It’s not that I’m trying to eradicate such terminology from my work or my life (and certainly not from anyone else’s), it’s just that I think I need to be vigilant about the subtle weightings and gravities that might steer my analysis away from a desired primary focus on learning, relationships, and ethics.

Tunes, songs, stories, or information can easily be considered in terms of their abstracted, formal, characteristics. Once abstracted, it is very easy to consider them as resources, and it is very easy for the abstractions to be reinforced by the materiality of texts, manuscripts, and recordings. When the going is good, the resources often get well cared for, well stored, well considered. Even then, however, the people from whom the resources were extracted, the stories of their lives and the vast array of what’s important to them, or adequate appraisal of social and political context, can easily come a distant second, if they are considered at all, as evidenced by vast quantities of published tune, song, and story collections. A mere suggestion of biography and humanity might well be taken as a radical move in the face of all those published collections of stuff where people seem to have been sucked out from between the pages to leave a more conventional and pervasive inhumanity. All too easily, people become merely “tradition-bearers”, the containers of resources and the conduit-facilitators of transmissional transactions. All too easily, talking to people about what’s important to them in their lives becomes “collection”, conceived of as the resource-extraction of raw materials. All too easily, speaking about cultural reservoirs or the heritage of the past becomes a way to usher in what I have elsewhere called a phantom nationalism (see McCann, forthcoming), as imagined storage facilities buttress imagined communities (Anderson 1991).

Prescriptive Invariance

A second memo-to-self about “tradition” concerns the frequent equation of “tradition” with some sense of prescriptive invariance. Handler and Linnekin (1984: 273) have written that “tradition cannot be defined in terms of boundedness, givenness, or essence”. Of course it can be. All it takes is for someone to define “tradition” in this way. Not

only that, but I would suggest the assumption that “tradition” refers to some sense of prescriptive invariance is still quite a common one, offering “rule-governed models that inculcate behavioural values and norms in such a way as to make those practices, values, and norms, even and especially those of relatively recent origin, appear continuous with the past” (Grieve, Weiss 2005: 10). Perhaps the two most influential statements characterising “tradition” as prescriptive invariance are offered by Weber (1968 [1921]), and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). These are not views of “tradition” that I am going to embrace wholeheartedly as a political position.

Needless to say, both of these positions are coming from critiques of “tradition”. Negatively coloured prescriptive-invariance understandings of “tradition” offer little room for agency, and little middle ground. On the one hand, the iron cage of tradition, on the other, freedom. Another option, static “tradition” faces off against gloriously dynamic modernity; or thoughtless “tradition” falls before progressive rationality. Whichever you choose, when prescriptive invariance is being critiqued in analyses of “tradition”, it is hard for “tradition” to come off as anything but second best. These understandings of “tradition” tend to be premised on the eternal victory of the Other of “tradition”. This is not going to help me much.

Prescriptive invariance is also to be found in the promotion and promulgation of “tradition”. In such situations, adherence to “tradition” can mean “an orientation towards an imagined timeless community, borne of the desire to submerge one’s personal identity into a larger community that transcends that individual” (Grieve, Weiss 2005: 3), “a commitment and a duty to a community that existed in the past, exists in the present, and will continue to exist as long as its members do not abandon it” (ibid.). Often framed as “traditionalism”, this kind of approach easily conforms to what might be termed “traditional closure”, whereby “tradition” comes to assume for people the character of an unqualified good. This tends to effect an apparent separation of “tradition” and, in particular, “traditional” teachings, from the contingencies of social and political life, allowing “tradition” to appear autonomous, value-free and politically-unattached in its transcendent timelessness.

As with negative positions, positive prescriptive-invariance understandings of “tradition” leave little room for agency and no middle ground. They imply an agency that is limited to a clear choice of decision-making – acceptance or rejection. Viewed from the positive logic of prescription, on one side lie the enticements of inclusion and community, intensely consolidated with the emotional weight of duty, loyalty, and uncritical obedience. On the other side lie exclusion and ostracisation, combined with the intense emotional weight of isolation, outsider-status, guilt, and betrayal. Once again, these are not qualities of “tradition” that I am keen to champion.

Where there is an expectation of invariance in the study of “tradition”, variance becomes notable and worthy of explanation. However, as Stuart Hall (1997) has suggested, it is not so much identifications of variance as it is declarations of *invariance* (any assertion that meaning can be fixed), that demand explanation, if only for their implausibility. The temptations of timelessness in academic analysis have not gone unnoticed (Fabian 1983; Duara 1998). This tendency to think of “tradition” in some way as the freezing of time suits urgent discourses of preservation in the face of change, decay, and ephemerality (see Reason 2006). In this light, some have gone as far as to suggest that, “The desire for tradition is thus also a desire for immortality” (Grieve, Weiss 2005: 3; see also Becker 1973).⁴

CONSEQUENCES?

We have archives, histories, institutions, and communities of academic discourse and academic practice to support the apparent adequacy of resource-management thinking. We have doctrines, texts, rules, institutions, and systems of formal schooling to support understandings of “tradition” as prescriptive invariance. But understandings of “tradition” that would reduce my experience of learning and witness to discussions about things, transactions, conduits, texts, and obligations, just don’t feel right to me. There’s a sense of missing, of not-enough, and significantly so. There’s a strength, a robustness, a relational substance to what I think about when I use “tradition” as a gateway to reflection. I lose that with resource management and prescriptive invariance. The poetics don’t fit. Lynne Tirrell uses the phrase, “experiential dissonance” (1993: 25). That sounds about right. I want more heart in my conversations. I want more people in my conversations. I want ways of talking and writing that sit more intimately with my life.

This wouldn’t matter so much except that academic and institutionally-legitimated ways of thinking, speaking, and writing about “tradition” frequently work to privilege certain perspectives and disempower others:

In its most obvious sense discourse authorises some to speak, some views to be taken seriously, while others are marginalised, derided, excluded and even prohibited. Discourses impose themselves upon social life, indeed they produce what it is possible to think, speak, and do. (Hunt, Wickham 1994: 8–9)

Wherever we foster and facilitate a focus in “tradition studies” on either resource management or prescriptive invariance, to the detriment of a focus on people and personal relationship, I believe we have been engaging in what I have termed elsewhere “discursive feedback” (McCann 2005). I use this term to speak of a process Michel Foucault (1972) has described as systematically forming the objects of which we speak. The “traditions” that we speak of increasingly come to fit only those understandings with which we initially approached our research.⁵

One clear consequence of such approaches is that the authority for making sense of those most visible “traditions” comes to rest firmly with the resource managers and the identifiers of invariance. Those with academic, organisational, and institutional status come to be recognised as being more able to make sense of local “traditions” than local people themselves. Those with a greater ability to sculpt words and document texts easily think of themselves as the privileged guardians of knowledge and the priestly class of any imagined community of “tradition”. Within a resource-management, information-transmission model of “tradition”, it is very easy to pass responsibility for “tradition” over to the experts, to those who are professionally trained and responsible for preserving information – academics and archivists. If it’s all about protecting the information for future generations, then who better to do that? How better to do that?

“Tradition” as a notion, then, easily becomes the facilitator of hierarchies of knowledge, the privileging of institutions, the inscription of texts, and the diminishment of the agency of people in the less formalised contexts of local communities. The variations and nuances of lives lived can become subordinated to the more coherent and regular knowledge constructions of centralised authorities. People can be left to struggle

with what Audre Lorde has referred to as “the restrictions of externally imposed definition” (1984: 121). Alternative understandings of “tradition”, that is, locally-negotiated understandings of “tradition” that don’t fit within the dominant paradigms, can easily become discursively invisible and politically irrelevant.

Resource-management or prescriptive-invariance models of “tradition” leave us with reductive stereotypes about the learning we experience in the company of others as we bear witness. However, they are not to be summarily dismissed, for, as Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie has said, speaking of “The Danger of the Single Story”: “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” (Adichie 2009) The overlain binaries of tradition-modernity, passive-active, conservative-dynamic, static-changing, communalist-individualist, do not tell the whole story, as many have noted before. Wherefore the understandings of “tradition” that allow purveyors of such binaries (even or especially if that includes me) to stand transparently as traders in partial and misrepresentative “single stories”? (Or should that be “double stories”?) I would like an understanding of “tradition” that invites me to dissolve the worst excesses of modernisation theory and detraditionalisation hypotheses (see Heelas, Lash, Morris 1996), which strike me as quite disrespectful of many people’s attempts to sustainably maintain continuities of learning and wisdom in their own localities and communities (see Prakash, Esteva 1998).

If you wish to live “tradition”, these conversations, these narratives, such claims about “tradition”, don’t leave you with much of a choice. You mainly get to choose among various worlds pervaded by determinism: worlds of prescription; of storage and retrieval; of unthinking repetition; of unquestioned ideology and unquestioned authority. You could also opt for a world of despair as you passively watch what you love inevitably disappearing in the face of active change and a steamrolling modernity, while clambering to preserve it in the face of impending and irreparable silence.

Those aren’t terribly attractive propositions, in my reckoning. And for denigrators of “tradition” and the “traditional”, perched like vultures, such stories serve “tradition” up on a plate, ready to be chewed up and spat out. This is made particularly clear by the statement of manifest destiny that was hoisted as a motto in Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools across the United States in the 20th century: “Tradition is the Enemy of Progress” (O’Sullivan 2001: 164). People often find that their lived ways of thinking and doing become subordinately represented as passive, atavistic, or conservative in the face of rhetorics of modernity, innovation, or progress (see McCann, forthcoming).

The workaday discourses of “tradition” mentioned above can wrench political possibilities out of our grasp. This discursive depoliticisation first of all allows for the irrelevancy of “tradition” to social and political thought, but secondly, and more importantly, fosters and facilitates the political marginalisation of those people and communities who might, in turn, be considered or consider themselves “traditional”. Muana (1998) has identified this issue as being a core concern in the revival and/or preservation of “traditions”.⁶ People often reach for notions of “tradition” to speak of ways of thinking and ways of doing that were and continue to be important to them, especially when they feel that the persistence of their ways of life may be under threat by particular kinds of unhelpful social change (see Grieve, Weiss 2005). At such times, many people would like to speak about feelings of encroachment, a sense of injustice, anger about

misrepresentations of what they believe and stand for, or maybe express their sense of deep relational connection with those who have gone before and who are yet to come. These deeply felt, profoundly emotional ways of thinking about “tradition” are not readily articulable if the ways of speaking about “tradition” centre on resource management or prescriptive invariance. The temptation is great, however, to accept the terms of discussion, and to join a reductionist dance that does violence to the experiential richness of what we can and do learn from those around us, both helpfully and unhelpfully. Fundamentally, workaday understandings of “tradition” can frequently leave little room for heart, for love, for people, or for hope.

Models of “tradition” based in resource management and prescriptive invariance also leave hardly any room whatsoever for legacies of learning in which questioning and critique are actively encouraged. They leave little room for us to speak of the courage that we learn from others to speak up and speak out, to face up to uncertainties, to challenge oppression (see Fisher 1993; Eyerman, Jamison 1998; King-Dorset 2008). They do not easily facilitate conversations about agency, about uncertainty, about challenges, about learning to make sense of life for yourself. They don’t allow us to account much for the considerable *differences* that might develop between the lives of our most influential teachers and our own lives. Sometimes our greatest learning from another becomes the least visible. Sometimes what we get from somebody else is a learning about what we don’t want to do, what we don’t want to think. Those people are our teachers, too. Understandings of “tradition” as “that which is handed on” or “that which we must do” don’t in any way encompass those conversations.

Resource-management and prescriptive-invariance understandings of “tradition” leave us none the wiser in the face of aggressively intensifying social and environmental changes such as accelerative commodification, aggressive corporate industrialisation, or climate change. They offer little room for voices of resistance or discontent. Understood as the transmission of single units, the units themselves do not contain their alternatives. Understood as aspects of people’s lives, they might. Understood as prescriptive invariance, thinking of “tradition” as the foundation for radical political alternatives becomes simply ridiculous. The mere acceptance and collation of “tradition” as “that which is given” can over time constrict the social imagination of other possibilities, of other ways of thinking, of other ways of being. Little wonder that people, particularly people of younger generations, often think that the only possibility to effect some sense of agency in the context of conversations about “tradition” is to radically separate themselves from what has been pre-sent, from the already-given. In what other ways can we continue to develop workaday discourses so that “tradition” can serve as a term that speaks of meaningful yet non-oppressive forces for personal and social transformation in our own lives and in the lives of our children? Surely we can continue to find more helpful ways to think about “tradition” in the context of the social, political, and environmental challenges that people face?

If we do not accept the distinctions drawn around (and across) us, then we must draw some of our own (Tirrell 1993: 11).

Neil Postman advises that the best way to free our minds from what he calls “the tyranny of definitions” is to provide alternative definitions, in an understanding that definitions can be considered “instruments designed to achieve certain purposes” (1996: 183). Bill

Ashcroft asks that "We can take these dominant discourses, and transform them in the service of our own self-empowerment" (2001: 1). Following Michael Reddy's critique of the effect of the conduit metaphor on thought processes among speakers of English, I find myself with a need for other stories about "tradition", so that the deeper implications of resource-management and prescriptive-invariance understandings of "tradition" can be drawn out by way of contrast (Reddy 1979: 292).

I thought a lot about "tradition" during the final months of my father's life. Here was a man who had been my mentor and my friend, a touchstone for my thinking, a sounding board for my philosophical explorations. My Dad. Here we were, in the space between here and gone. Sitting with my father I understood a little better some of the emotional realities that these terms allow us to signpost for ourselves and others. For me, if the term "tradition" is to mean anything, it is to help me make sense of the question, "what have I learned from my Dad?" and, in turn, to open up the question, "what might I like my kids to learn about life?"

After many months of reflection, I finally decided that I was happy that the following understanding of "tradition" might allow me to open up the kinds of conversations I want to be part of:

Ways of thinking and ways of doing, considered within a learning context of relationship or community.

This isn't offered as a definition. I find definitions tend to reduce authorities for meaning, and establish hierarchies of knowledge, position, and perspective. Instead, it is offered simply as a positioning. For that positioning I shall remain accountable and responsible. This is what I would consider a helpful understanding of "tradition" in my own life. I may change it as I go along, but for the moment, I'm happy to work with it.

This understanding allows me to foreground and privilege people and their practices. I have not mentioned "things" in my understanding of "tradition", primarily to leave a conversation open about reification, commodification, and thingification, considered as practices and particular (and peculiar) qualities of relationship.

This understanding invites me to consider conversations about "tradition" as also being conversations about learning. For a while I used the word "educational" in place of "learning". I default to "learning", as conversations about "education" tend to be dominated by discussions about formal, institutional learning, sedimented with hierarchies of knowledge and authority, and saturated with resource-management models of transmission. This isn't necessarily the case, but I find that "learning" opens up a relationship-privileging, and agency-privileging perspective. It can also easily include both institutional and informal contexts of learning.

The inclusion of "context" is to invite me to specificity. I want my understandings and analyses of "tradition" to become always-already "peopled", always-already relational. In this way, a conversation about "tradition" can become for me a series of challenges and questions about what it might mean to be human. I want to work with a notion of "tradition" that invites particularist analysis, that draws me down to the specificities of people's lives, and thereby to the specificities of my own:

If we are ever to remember what it is to be human beings, and if we are ever to hope to begin to live sustainably in place (which is the only way to live sustainably), we will have to remember that specificity is *everything*. It's the only thing we've got.

In this moment I'm not abstractly writing: I'm writing these specific words on this specific piece of paper using this specific pen, lying on this specific bed next to this specific cat. There is nothing apart from the particular. Now, I can certainly generate abstract notions of writing or humanity or cities or nature or the world, but they're not real. What is real is immediate, present, particular, specific. (Jensen 2004: 60).

As Abu-Lughod (1991: 154) has noted, by focusing on particular individuals and their changing relationships, we can subvert the problematic temptations of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness in our analyses. This is as important in conversations about "tradition" as it was for Abu-Lughod in conversations about "culture". By giving context due weighting in conversations about "tradition", I remind myself that I am interested in the always-already hereness of relationship. I remind myself that casual abstractions can easily distance me from the nuances and subtleties of relationship that would otherwise challenge me any time I felt abstraction was a helpful way to proceed.

EPILOGUE

It is not necessary that "tradition" remain marginalised within the social sciences and humanities. As Grieve and Weiss write; "tradition can be analysed as a strategic tool of cultural critique" (2005: 15). Conversations catalysed by the term "tradition" can include conversations that have been, and remain, central to the concerns of critical social thought: power, agency, domination, oppression, expansionary social dynamics, violence, capitalism, commodification, ideologies, education, gender, socialisation, interaction, identities, social structure, social change, and social transformation (for example, Langellier 1989; Mills 1993; Paredes 1995; Muana 1998; MacDougall 2004; King-Dorset 2008). What's more, they can let us engage with these issues from deeply peopled and particularist perspectives. As this happens, though, it would help to acknowledge the power of resource-management and prescriptive-invariance thinking in discussions about "tradition", and to respond to the limitations that such emphases can shackle us with. May and Powell (2008: 1) have suggested that social theory can allow us "to examine taken-for-granted assumptions, explore the basis and content of interpretations of the social world, its structural dynamics and the place of human agency within it". Conversations about "tradition" can continue to facilitate such examinations and explorations.

If I understand my own "traditions" as ways of thinking, ways of doing, considered within a learning context of relationship or community, then I could consider myself to have come from a "traditional" family, indeed, anyone could. I don't get any sense of status or superiority after claiming this for myself, but it does feel like the beginning of a whole range of exciting conversations. How have I learned in the company of both my parents? How have I learned in the company of my siblings? My friends? My lovers? How do I happen to be how I am and not some other way(s)?

And, crucially, what might I like my kids to learn about life? (Should I ever have kids.) What emotional climate and learning context would I work to provide for them? How might I encourage them to think about authority, about questioning, about working things out for themselves? How might I invite them to think about different quali-

ties of relationship? About friendship? About love? About family? About relatives? How might I open up questions for them about their relationship to conflict, structural violence, oppressive systems, and social injustice? How might I encourage them to remain considerate of people that have passed on and of people who are yet to be born? How might I invite them to consider their role in social change and helpful social and political transformations? How might I encourage them to dream?

“What might I like my kids to learn about life?” invites a positioning, not only about which kinds of “traditions” of learning might be possible, but which might be preferable, which might be more helpful. Which in turn invites the questions, “More helpful for what?” and “According to what criteria?” I can continually return to clarify both what has become important to me, and what I would like to be important to me, being careful who I pretend to be for that is who I may become, and whom others may learn from. I can become more accountable and responsible for my place in lives of interpersonal and intergenerational learning, holistically considered.

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NOTES

1 As Neil Postman has written, “Meaning is not *in* words. Meaning is in people, and whatever meaning words have are assigned or ascribed to them by people” (1996: 183).

2 I have elsewhere made a more sustained critique of discourses of resource production and management and their relationship to processes of enclosure and commodification (McCann 2005).

3 There are too many to list. Among the books closest to me on the shelf are Marie McCarthy’s *Passing It On* (1999) and Lillis Ó Laoire’s *On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean* (2005).

4 There may be other implications, however, particularly in relation to issues of agency; as Virginia Dominguez has suggested: “When we assert the need to salvage, rescue, save, preserve a series of objects or forms, we announce our fear of its destruction, our inability to trust others to take appropriate action and our sense of entitlement over the fate of the objects. Our best liberal intentions do little other than patronize those slated for cultural salvage.” (Dominguez 1987: 131)

5 “The powerful normally determine what is said and sayable. When the powerful label something or dub it or baptize it, the thing becomes what they call it.” (Frye 1983: 105)

6 “The researcher may [...] find it difficult to reconcile the conflictual fit between his/her analytical parameters and the perspectives of the ‘native’ being investigated (Muana 1993). This has never dissuaded some researchers from asserting that they are ‘ventriloquizing’ for the native (Ritchie 1993). This practice of ‘de-voicing’ the native has implications for the status of the interpretations and conclusions reached by the researchers.” (Muana 1998: 52)

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