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Taking tea with Grandaddy Tough: Accessing the affective topography of logging poetry and labour

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ABSTRACT

In this article I draw upon life history interviews I conducted with retired loggers on the Sechelt Peninsula of British Columbia and published logger poetry to examine the complex embodied and affective relations loggers have with the landscapes they helped shape and the machines and conditions under which they worked. Specifically I examine how the dangers inherent to logging labour are paired with particular affective relations to local landscapes and the machines with which logger's shaped them. I suggest that repetitive explanations offered in logger poetry and the labour history interviews I conducted be examined as something more nuanced, interesting and grounded than mere masculine self-mythologizing. I explore these representations as evidence of an incomplete, melancholic process of mourning for personal and environmental losses sustained in logging labour.

Grandaddy Tough *(abridged)*
by Peter Trower

Grandaddy Tough's
got a history of logging
in his hard hands
the cold-decked[1] memories
lie eager for the telling

he's old and young
the manfires
smoulder in him
He has stripped more sidehills
than I'll ever know
lost spar trees[2]
shudder in his eyes

He has walked with legends
and all unknowing
become one
beyond the heyday of his boots
the forests thrown down
regrown
and thrown down again

Among the boys he walks
careless with experience
Grandaddy Tough
a bridge of gristle
between then and now
The steam pots the skylines
rust on remembered ridges
but he lurches on
under trees of steel
in the knotty triumph of his trade

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[1] Cold-decked: logs piled up to be brought into a landing later on, or a pile of logs at sawmill awaiting processing. Cold-decking only emerged as a common practice when increased mechanization in the woods created a situation where timber could be felled much faster than it could be hauled.

[2] A spar tree is the central component of a high-lead logging operation. Historically, the tallest tree on a plot of land set to be logged would be selected, topped, and cables would be anchored to it in order to haul cut logs from the woods and arrange them for transport. Popularized in 1916, high-lead logging is a means of lifting logs by a series of elevated cables above the forest floor in order to move them without obstructions. Initially, the layout of roads and railways to get logs out of the woods would be determined by the location of natural spar trees. These were later replaced by steel spars that could be moved into location by rail, and subsequently truck. This moved eliminated many jobs, as it was no longer necessary to send a rigging crew ahead of fallers to prepare a spar tree. It also increased access to timber and the rate at which it could be felled (Rajala, 1998).

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1. Introduction: the "real" logger and the "ink maggot"

According to all of the loggers I talked to during my fieldwork I arrived too late. The person I really should have talked to died a couple of years ago; there were no "real" loggers left on the Sechelt Peninsula of British Columbia. With almost every cold-call I made in an attempt talk to retired local loggers, some rendition of the same exchange seemed to happen. After I explained my research interest in how loggers understood and accounted for the impacts of their labour on the local landscape some version of "well, I don't know what use I can be" would be offered. At my insistence that any information would be useful it was agreed that we could "have a bullshit" anyway, "what the hell," and an interview would be set for "the next time it rains" or "tomorrow, if it rains." Before I had even conducted my first interview, this repeated encounter introduced me to several important social facts: first, that there was an internal hierarchy of loggers; and second, bad weather is just about the only excuse for sitting around talking during the day when you could be working (retired or not). Over the course of my fieldwork I became increasingly interested in the discursive construction of the "real" logger and the relative distance from this figure noted by all of my interviewees. For the men I spoke with this felt distance was amplified by the changed provincial social context in which loggers had passed from admirable pioneers to enemies of the environment. Neither of these representations were adequate descriptions of their experiences. In this article I examine how the figurative passing of the "real" logger and the material conditions and effects of local logging labour were presented to me in life history interviews and reinforced by published logger poetry. I suggest that the repetitive representations found within these two sources – of the danger and skill involved in logging labour – be interrogated as something more nuanced, interesting and grounded than mere masculine self-mythologizing. I explore these representations and the construction of the "real" logger as evidence of an incomplete, melancholic process of mourning for personal and environmental losses sustained in logging labour.

Most of the men who did agree to talk to me were retired and between 70 and 95 years of age. Their work experience ranged from small camps of two or three men to "the show," yarding logs – moving and stacking cut logs for transport – with thirty or more men. But, as was a requirement for my research, all had spent time logging the local landscape. Another commonality was time spent "gyppo" logging. I came to understand that this meant not only that they worked in small crews with minimal equipment, but also that operations were characterized by a certain kind of mad-ingenuity where equipment might be repurposed to serve an immediate need and the safety of a crew was regarded more as a consequence of the experience of the workers than adherence to written safety regulations.[3] Over the course of many hours in conversation a picture of the "real" logger emerged, most succinctly described by the poem above: a man, with exceptional technical know-how and a strong back that entered the forbidding forested landscapes of British Columbia and emerged with pride in his labour and more than a few good yarns. The real logger was made in the doing. His status was affirmed socially when his work – experience and survivals – spoke for itself.

For the non-logger, however, this labour does not speak for itself. The technical nature of the work and the jargon that accompanies it are significant obstacles to accessing the insider's perspective. Building rapport is further complicated by the assumption that outsiders are likely to be hostile. To the outsider the celebration of logging as a culture often appears to be reducible to a celebration of rugged individualism and masculine prowess. Certainly these tropes are ubiquitous in both official provincial histories and the stories that were relayed to me, but, I began my research with the conviction that this was not the entire (nor the most important) story. There is no escaping the topic of danger in discussions of logging labour, simply because the work *is* dangerous. The important task is to resist collapsing the realities of these dangers into caricatures of loggers as possessing a simple man-against-nature perspective on environmental issues. It is not a new revelation in anthropology that tropes of masculinity in working-cultures often shroud more complex issues in political ecology and economy (Bernard, 1967, 1987). I asked the men I spoke with to explain to me both how local landscapes had been worked and what they thought of the post-extraction recovery. Overwhelmingly, the stories I was told in response to these questions were about the machines with which the men worked and the challenges presented by various trees and topography. It quickly became clear that if I wanted to know how logger's felt about environmental issues I would first have to learn more about the machines through-and-with-which the men I was speaking to came to know local environments.

The particular consistent moral within the narratives provided to me by loggers contained an inversion of the conservation ethic predominant in environmentalist discourse in British Columbia. Knowing nature came from the labour of altering and manipulating it. For these men the most elementary and ethical relations to nature are achieved through active transformation of the body and spirit through hard work on the land. None denied that their labour had contributed to the destruction of old growth habitat, but this decline was attributed primarily to government and corporate mismanagement. What a logger is, *or was*, was still something to be proud of, something that exceeded the rationale of production. To the men I spoke with logging was a culture,[4] a vanishing way of life, a terrible-wonderful freedom to know what could be performatively produced in the "ontological choreography" (Haraway, 2003, 100) between men, machines and the forbidding British Columbian landscape. Over time I came to appreciate the highly skilled labour of felling timber and the intimate attachments loggers formed to local environments even as they tore them down.

Despite the daily presence of trucks carrying multi-ton loads of logs on the highway, logging is now predominantly spoken of as a marginal local industry. Forestry sector work accounts for 3–5% of employment in the area (Data from Statistics Canada, 2007). A few entrepreneurial loggers have moved into clearing land for real estate developments, or become developers themselves. Still others continue the "gyppo" logging tradition working for larger companies and the Sechelt Community Forest down the coast. When I started my fieldwork part of what I wanted to understand was why an active contemporary industry was consigned to the past by loggers and non-loggers alike on the Sechelt Peninsula. Two forces seem to be at work. First there are efforts by contemporary logging companies to

[3] The gyppo system expanded exponentially with the widespread adoption of truck logging after the Great Depression. Gyppo loggers worked largely as sub-contractors to larger firms and "received a fixed rate for logs delivered to the mill or railroad, absorbing the lion's share of risk and supervisory responsibilities" (Rajala, 1998:38).

[4] Many researchers before me have struggled with how, or whether, to address this claim (cf. Brown, 1995; Furniss, 1999; Reed, 2003; Satterfield, 2002). I have taken this claim to logging as a culture seriously – after all, it fits any classic anthropological definition of culture as a combination of shared values, beliefs, material culture – but with a firmly critical stance against apolitical pluralism and cultural relativism.