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IN THE HOUSE OF THE MAN-EATER

THE IMAGE BEAU DICK designed to represent the concept for *Devoured by Consumerism* depicts two human figures in the mouth of a much larger being. That one of these figures has a dollar sign and an X for eyes, the other a monitor for a head with infinite spiralling eyes, suggests the powerful compulsions that prepare modern humans to become prey to a rapaciousness far greater than their own: the hypnotic manipulation of mass media, and the continually stimulated desire for money and material goods. That Beau envisioned this particular man-eater as a sea monster recalls another apocalyptic and all-consuming devourer of humankind, Leviathan, whose jaws, in medieval depictions, opened onto hell.

Although modern consumerism is tied to recent shifts in the dynamics of capitalist society, its foundations in the Americas can be found in the earliest encounters with Europeans, whose competitive, self-centred drives to extract maximum profit from the natural resources of the “New World” set the pattern for what continues today. After the founding of the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1670, the British established settlements along



“Hellmouth” miniature from *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, c. 1440

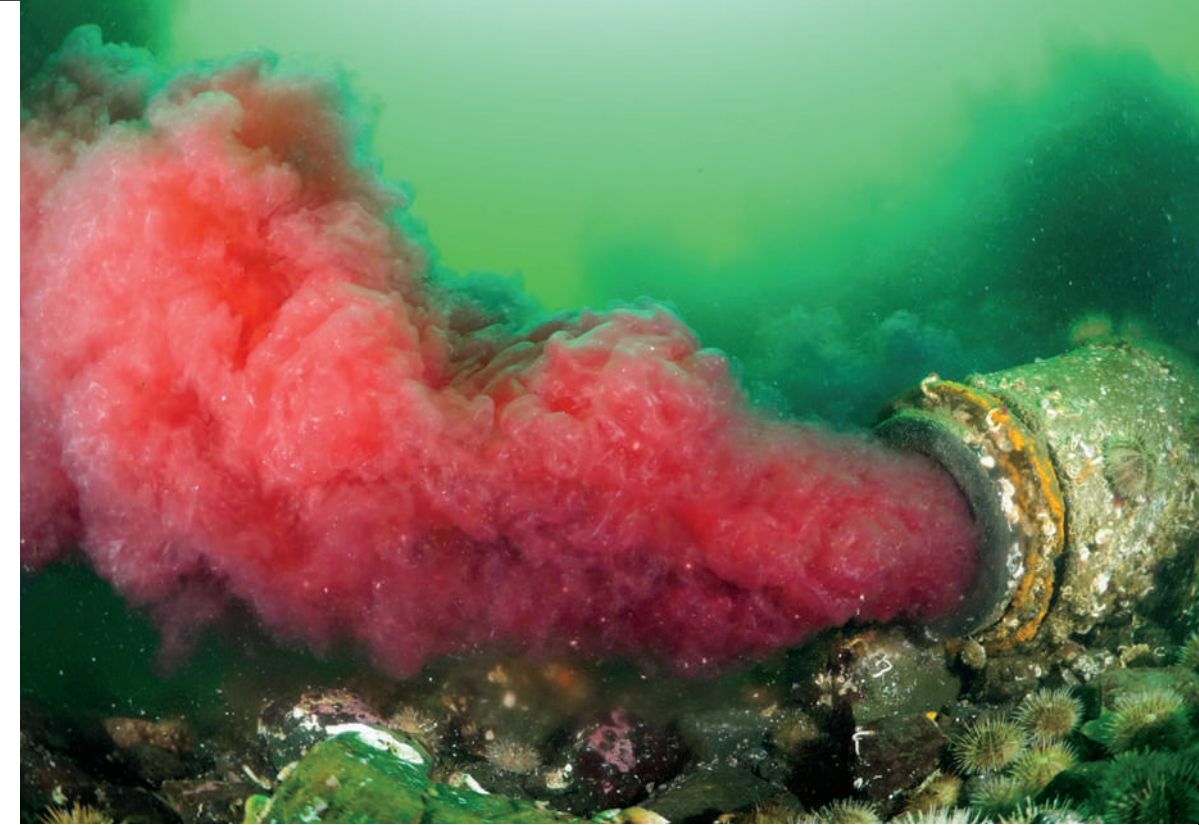
the shores of the Pacific Northwest coast. When the beaver and sea otter had been hunted to near extinction, the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush beginning in 1857 convinced the colonial authorities in London to declare much of what is now the province of B.C. a colony of the British Empire. That *Leviathan* was also the title for Thomas Hobbes’s seventeenth-century treatise on the absolute power of the English monarch to secure the nation’s “commonwealth” reminds us that the political foundations of

Canada, which justify the relentless extraction of material wealth from the occupied territories of the Pacific Northwest, are still ultimately overseen by the Crown.

Consumerism may be a modern form of untrammelled human voraciousness, but devouring is an activity common to all living beings. Gaping and grimacing mouths are a recurring motif in Northwest Coast art, often used to represent a portal between one world and another, as when mouths are used for the entrance to the sacred space of a longhouse. Devouring mouths appear in many Traditional Stories of great beings who live by eating lesser ones: Thunderbird, Sisiyutł (Sea Monster), Orca, Eagle, Bear, Wolf, Otter, and Salmon.

Such beings have the power to transform into humans, and viceversa. To adapt to an Indigenous perspective the Latin proverb famously used by Hobbes, one might say that “man may be a wolf to man, but a wolf is a person to a wolf.” All living beings that kill and eat other beings are in this sense cannibals, for what they eat are persons in another skin. Many Oral Traditions tell of how specific creatures are the ancestors of humans, and therefore to kill and eat them is to consume one’s own kind.

The means by which we manage the potential catastrophe of unlimited appetite is something that environmental and anti-capitalist activists have been discussing for many years. The Kwakwaka’wakw have a profound religious understanding of this problem and ritual practices to counter it, practices that have been handed down through generations and are expressed most emphatically in the rites of the Hamat’sa society, of which Beau was a high-ranking member.



Still from Tavish Campbell's video "Blood Water: BC's Dirty Salmon Farming Secret," 2017

IN NOVEMBER 2017, a photographer from Quadra Island posted a video of a vivid red cloud billowing from the mouth of an urchin-clad underwater pipe off the coast of Vancouver Island.[1] This spectacular effusion was the blood and remains of locally farmed Atlantic salmon, which the processing plant was pumping into the waters surrounding British Columbia’s Discovery Islands. The area is part of a major migratory route for wild salmon. The effluent contained viruses and parasites that are potentially damaging for the wild salmon, upon which First Nations Peoples have depended for millennia.

Salmon are ancestral kin who, according to Oral Traditions, live in their underwater realm just as humans do above, in villages with longhouses, chiefs, nobles, clans, and annual ceremonies. Every spring, the salmon offer themselves up to be eaten, a sacrifice of immense



Beau Dick carrying the Copper Numgamala at his potlatch ceremony, 'Namgis Traditional Big House, Alert Bay, BC, 2013

importance, which must be honoured by strict ceremonial procedures to secure the harmonious, long-term coexistence of the two groups.

The profound intimacy between Indigenous Peoples and the beings they share their world with and depend upon is a stark contrast to the mass-market meat production that brings the flesh of other beings to most plates. It has been a slow awakening, but gradually, in those small pockets of the world where Indigenous traditions and cosmologies have survived the exterminatory logics of colonialism, settler communities are transforming their ways of being according to lessons learned by Indigenous Peoples long ago.

Since the 1990s, environmental activists in B.C. have joined forces with Indigenous communities to protect wild salmon from the dangers of factory farming—an uphill struggle, given that farmed salmon are

currently the province's highest-valued agricultural export. One of the most active people in this battle, Alexandra Morton, accompanied Beau on the first of his "journeys of truth and unity," *Awalaskenis I*, to symbolically break the Potlatch Copper named Nunmgalaat the British Columbia legislative buildings in Victoria in February 2013. It was a gesture of Indigenous self-affirmation, and a protest against a government that has reneged on its promises and failed in its moral and legal obligations to the First Nations.

THE POTLATCH TRADITIONS of the Northwest Coast have long been known to anthropologists, first through the observations of Franz Boas, whose monumental collection of works about the Kwakwaka'wakw has been an important resource for their cultural resurgence, and also through Marcel Mauss's influential 1925 article "Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques" (An essay on the gift: The form and reason of exchange in archaic societies), in which Potlatch is discussed as a pre-modern alternative to the acquisitive and individualistic rationality of *Homo economicus*.

Canada passed the Indian Act in 1876, and immediately the colonial government in B.C. began enacting legislation designed to destroy, through assimilation or conversion, the traditional ways of life of Indigenous Peoples in the province. Even as radical left-wing currents in Europe were adopting the idea of Potlatch as an anti-capitalist paradigm, communities in B.C. had to fight to keep their Potlatch and winter dance ceremonies alive. At the forefront of this struggle were the Kwakwaka'wakw nobles and Potlatch chiefs, many of whom, like Mungo

Martin and Willie Seaweed, were artists themselves, apprenticed by their elders in the tradition of carving to create the masks and regalia that were danced and gifted at their ceremonies. Beau is an important link in this chain of ancestral carvers whose work has created a bridge between settler collectors and the strict ceremonial protocols of Kwakwaka'wakw tradition. Beau insisted that his work, whether seen in galleries or long-houses, be recognized as regalia. His creations function both as works of art in the usual Western sense, and as artifacts of profound religious significance through which the spirits and the ancestors live.

The graphic footage of red, smoke-like clouds billowing from an otherworldly chimney evokes a story about the origins of the Hamatsa society. The story, in a version told by the Kwakwaka'wakw elder Agnes Alfred,[2] tells of four brothers who decide to go hunting on the slopes of a mountain. Their father, Nanwaqawēy, warns them not to enter the house from whose chimney red smoke billows. They come across the house and enter anyways. In the house they encounter a huge woman with a black painted face. She dips a stick into a wound on one of the brothers' knees and feeds the blood to her hungry child. Realizing they are in a house of man-eaters, the brothers invent a game to help them escape: they shoot arrows through a knothole in the wall, then run outside to retrieve the arrows. When the brothers don't return the giant woman realizes she has been tricked and shouts for her husband, Baxwbakwalanuksiwe', or "Man-Eater-at-the-North-End-of-the-World," a giant bear-like being whose body is covered in gaping, blood-stained mouths.[3] He chases the brothers back to their village, making the "hap, hap, hap!" cry

of the Hamatsa. Nanwaqawēy persuades Man-Eater to come back with all his family the next day, when he will have prepared his four sons to be eaten. When Man-Eater returns, he unwittingly eats the meat of four slaughtered dogs, and then he and his family are tipped into a pit of hot coals and destroyed. From their burning ashes are born the mosquito and the horse-fly, who live by biting and sucking the blood of humans. On returning victoriously to the house of Man-Eater, the brothers discover a supernatural treasure box containing whistles, a bear mask, and the masks of three giant "cannibal" birds: Gwaxgwakwalanuksiwe' (Raven-at-the-North-End-of-the-World), Huxhugwaxtawe' (Huxwhukw of Heaven), and Galugada'yi (Crooked Beak of Heaven).[4] These are the three birds represented in Beau's exquisite *Moogums* mask (see page [XX—page with IMAGE 11]).

The dance of the cannibal birds forms an important part of the Hamatsa initiation ceremony, when a new member of the society, who has been residing in a secret location in the forest for several days, returns to the village with a wild hunger for human flesh. His return is announced by his other-worldly whistles, and the initiate arrives at the Longhouse clothed in hemlock, surrounded by already-initiated members of the society, who prevent him from running wild and ripping flesh from spectators.

Later in the ceremony, after his clothing of hemlock has been replaced by regalia of red cedar bark, a Potlatch Copper is held before the Hamatsa, who reaches for it with trembling hands. Eventually he is able to control the terrible hunger of Man-Eater, and he

Winalagalis (War Spirit) Puppet 2015

detail

Western redcedar, acrylic, graphite,
horsehair, canvas, cedar bark

60" × 20" × 12"

achieves a higherstate of human-ness. Perhaps this is why, in the language of the Owikeno (Wuikinuxv) people who live to the north of the Kwakwaka'wakw, Baxwbakwalanuksiwe'can be translated as "becoming-increasingly-human-by-passing-through-an-aperture."

The ceremonial taming of Man-Eater, like all the dances and actions performed during potlatches and Winter Ceremonies, must be undertaken with an exacting, ritual precision. The ceremonies have little to do with a rapturous loss of self of the sort associated with Christian mysticism or the hedonistic excesses of bacchanalian and ecstatic religions. It is, on the contrary, a highly-proscribed and protracted ritual that must be performed with the utmost respect for protocols.

Man-Eater's desire to eat human flesh is a manifestation of a generalized primal hunger that, if left unchecked, can destroy the universe. Under such circumstances a highly-organized code of ritual action, to which all members of the community must comply, guarantees that the devastating potential of insatiable appetite can be balanced with the needs of the greater community of beings in this world that we all share. As Stanley Walens writes in *Feasting with Cannibals*, Kwakwaka'wakw cosmology "is founded on principles of omnipresent hunger and man has the moral responsibility to be the master, not the slave, of that hunger."

