Abstract

Using my experience at the Prats-de-Mollo-la-Preste Bear Festival in 2004 as a narrative frame, my Master’s Thesis explores the human-bear interface throughout Pyrenean history, and the current 2006-2009 reintroduction plan. In part, my work focuses on the need for a reconstruction of ecocentric Bear Ceremonial practices, especially in the context of performance art and festivals, in order to welcome bear repopulation. Interdisciplinary lenses, including ethnography, anthropology, biology, history, economy, and politics have been used to bring about a multifaceted perspective on the Pyrenees in which themes relating to ursine veneration, mass hunting, bear exhibitors, and transhumance (or a seasonal vertical sheep herding) are all interwoven. This work seeks to encompass the charged Pyrenean topocosm, while negotiating a present and future co-evolution of bears and humans. Because of little having been written in English for a non-academic audience on the bear’s ecological and cultural Pyrenean niche, because of the subject matter’s importance to both international species initiatives and bioregional festivals, and because of its relevance to human-animal relations, the hope inherent in this creative explication is both discovery and application.

Now, that having been said, because I’m not able to become a bear today, nor can I smear you with soot, I’ll do my best to slather you with words and images. In doing so, maybe you’ll, too, see that we’re all kin to bears. This thesis, after all, is an attempt to comprehend what exactly happened on February 26, 2004 in the small Catalanian village of Prats-de-Mollo when I found myself running like hell from three men-bears covered in sheepskin, soot and oil. Moreover, it’s an attempt to unsmudge, just a little bit, the smearing, to turn around and run back toward that vanishing man-bear.

On November 1, 2004, the last female bear of indigenous stock named Cannelle was shot in the Pyrenean Aspe Valley, near the French-Spanish border, in “self-defense” by a boar-hunter. French Environmental Minister Serge Lepeltier called the killing an “ecological disaster,” and French President Jacques Chirac joined the public outcry (“Un-Bear-Able”). The inevitable extinction of the Pyrenean brown bear seemingly brings to a close an inveterate rapport between humans and bears. Yet, the bear still breathes due to a long-term reintroduction plan involving Slovenian brown bears, cultural artifacts seen
in toponymy (place-names), mythology, and a dynamic patrimony of bear ceremonialism and festivals that ultimately span the globe.

At present, the Pyrenean population is between 19 and 23 bears, with 10 more transplants planned over the next three years. Not only are there potential breaches of habitat through ski resorts, highways, railroads, and continued logging, but the bears’ presence is also a call to resistance for many shepherds, and hunters. In spite of this repopulation plan being called “a breakthrough in cross-border co-operation,” young bears transplanted in their new homeland have to face protestors’ firecrackers, flares, bells, and even glass mixed into honey (Nash). Interested in “safeguarding the Pyrenean heritage” and revealing “the new face of pastoralism” these rural combatants are concerned with preserving their flocks and simplifying Pyrenean identity (Menten, “Phillipe”).

In all reality, taking up their ancestor’s “War of the Maidens” by dressing as women and covering themselves in soot, the current French resistance isn’t a coup against another government, but, rather, its own. Having long fought off bears, taxation, land re-distribution, and a looming nation-state centralization, to have the French government reintroduce a species that has purportedly threatened their livelihood and land is overbearing. Perhaps one of the reasons there is so much backlash from shepherds is that they, too, are becoming endangered, and are in need of reintroduction. Yet, as timely as this post-modern reterritorialization of the mountain range is, bears have historically played a seminal role in Pyrenean identity, be it economy, cuisine, entertainment, medicine, ceremonialism and worldview, or simply the threat of predation.
The annual *fête de l’ours*, or ‘festival of the bear,’ seems to capture all of the conflicting elements: the ancient world-renewal hunt and ritual, the perceived savagery of wild beasts on the fringes of civilization, the coping, and the celebrating. On the bear’s day, all are forced onto the streets – the hobblers and infants (in times past, the man-bears would ransack the schools forcing children out of doors), tourists and ethnographers, and the *anti-ours* demonstrators and *pro-ours* advocates. To participate in the traditional events of the day confirms and reaffirms one’s collective identity, fulfills a profound need for ritual millions of years in the making, and must affect one’s individual stance on bear reintroduction. After all, when three men assume the awful role of bears and then descend upon the village people with violent blows and charges, lines are deeply drawn.

Yet, placed within the ancient ecocentric schema of European and global Bear Ceremonialism, the Pyrenean bear festivals take on an entirely different guise (Frank). When ancient myths such as Jean de l’Ours, a hybrid Bear-Son born of woman and bear, are taken into consideration alongside prehistoric cave art, euphemisms akin to aboriginal appellations, and oral artifacts such as humans descending from bears and the bear as both psychopomp and eternal judge, what appears to be a festival prizing human domination is, in fact, the ritualistic acknowledgment of kinship, the hope of renewed good luck, and the probability of past bear worship.

However, the particular Old World history and present controversy in the Pyrenees offers both an ecological model and a cautionary tale on how to live conscientiously in one’s own bioregion among “wild” animals. In a matter of three centuries, an estimated 3,000 brown bears were deliberately poisoned, trapped, axed,
stabbed, beaten, wrestled and shot due to fear, governmental bounties and fines lasting until 1947 (and a prohibition of bear hunts in 1962), fame, an economy based on bear products, and defense of flocks (Bouchet). Surprisingly, at the same time they were perceived as public enemy number one, bears, because of their prophylactic powers, were uprooted from their mothers early on and displaced in Academies where they were declawed, and educated; later, before all of the villagers, their graduation procession and ceremony at the public square entailed being garroted against a tree where they were muzzled with a searing iron, and castrated. For the rest of its productive life, a bear was bound to a montreur, or ‘an exhibitor,’ who traveled widely the Pyrenees and abroad, bestowing the great ancestor’s good luck and healing powers.

Replacing the bygone commerce of les montreurs d’ours, and bear hunts – both of which were born out of economic necessity – a new pattern of thinking and myth-making is presently happening. There has been as Gérard Caussimont says, an “introduction of ‘new’ notions…such as balance of nature, fauna, in danger of becoming extinct, wild living, conservation...” (Menten, “Gérard”). Organizations that are engaged in the direct sale of bioregional staples such as the Fromage Pé Descaous, a cheese imprinted with a bear’s paw, are not only yielding increased profits, but are bridging the gap between ecology and economy. Consumers who purchase this local product, along with traditional lamb and honey from groups supporting bear presence, are given the opportunity to support an economic infrastructure sustained by bioregional awareness and ecocentric living. In the process, they are reintroducing themselves to wildness.
FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Firecrackers wake the bears from their annual siesta. The lethargic creatures debouch from their dens into February sunshine, and gorge themselves on sausages and wine, coarsely staining their t-shirts. Old and young women shake their heads noting it. A man enters into Fort Lagarde’s open feeding and initiatory corral amongst the bears, and drops a bundle of skins. Armed Hunters sporting hats with red crests cocked forward over a black border, coonskins, and straw hats, further rouse and bedevil the beasts. Everybody, including the spectators (though there is no such thing really since everyone present becomes an actor in this rural drama), is dressed in either black or shabby clothes. Finally, the bears finish eating, though they don’t stop drinking.

I gather with others near a drop-off, anchor my feet, and peer over the edge. Fort Lagarde is a 17th century stronghold strategically perched on a hill to withstand sudden attack on the village below. Prats-de-Mollo-la-Preste, the village proper, is situated on the banks of the Tech River just under 2,500 feet beneath Canigou Peak in the Catalonian borderlands between France and Spain in the Pyrenees. In my position, up over the top of a bulwark, I see a thin dirt road leading out of the corral, running parallel to the valley and on through the fort’s gate. I can’t see it from here, but I know that the road then goes underground. Formerly, guards would safely traverse the distance between the village and the fort when under siege. Today, however, being La Diada de l’Os, or ‘The Bear’s Day,’ makes safe places and keeps vulnerable.

A British woman hears my wife and me speaking English, and makes conversation. “This is the first time for you?” she asks. We both nod our heads, not taking our eyes off of what we’re seeing below. “Last year they carried a few people
away on stretchers, you know. Oh, and those clothes...you should have worn others.”

She then filled us in on what we had only read through translation and imagined.

Below, in the middle of the fort’s path, a bald beefy man is becoming a bear. The process begins with an off-white sheepskin being wrapped around his upper body and stitched into place. Afterward, a tall woolly hat, rectangular in shape, is placed on the top of his head, and then fastened to the back of his new skin. A throng of people stand by, and join together in chanting the ceremonial *Bal de l’Ours*. There is something so very old in the song, something incantatious. Immediately upon the final stitches of his barbaric garb the Man-Bear goes berserk, and finding another of his kind, though much skinnier, tackles him to the ground. Several people in the way are shoved against a wooden railing, over which they climb, thinking the bar will protect them. In clouds of dust the wrestling continues. Soon afterward, a Hunter has at it with the bald bear, tossing a pole back and forth all the while.

The final phase of transformation ensues. Anointed with soot and oil, the Man-Bear’s arms and face are varnished in pitch-black. Later we would learn that this particular bear, massive and merciless as he appeared, was the local school bus driver. All together there are three who undergo the same transformation. And then it begins. These bears enact a shameless black comedy as they lumber and give chase from the fort to the labyrinth-like streets of Prats-de-Mollo-la-Preste. All souls are fair game in the Man-Bears’ mean eyes.

*Mâchurér*, or the ‘blackening’ is unleashed. Young women, children, men, invalids with crutches, older folk – none are exempt from the glistening hands of lawlessness. If a woman attempts to flee, she is violently thrown down and rolled over.
With each voluntary, and coerced, submission, the Man-Bear’s skin becomes darker as the soot spreads and penetrates his fur. The Hunters seem accomplices to the marauders as they scour together side by side, but they periodically fire blanks, symbolically killing the predators. Yet each death inevitably leads to another insurrection.

This brutal exhilaration reigns throughout the narrow and disorienting streets (and any tidy house or balcony a bear decides to ransack) from mid-afternoon through early evening. A vigilant bravado overcomes the crowd; some half-heartedly offer themselves up, while others are deeply unnerved by the thought that at any instant from any one, or three, of the village’s winding alleyways shadows could swipe fierce paws down upon their fragile bodies. Those who are quickly brought into the fold, however, follow every footstep of the **pedescaous**, barricading the escape routes and reveling in the smearing of others. I see a man face to face with a bear, smiling nervously, then lightly brushing his own two cheeks. The bear slathers the man’s face with impunity. Again and again, one hears the Ball’s simple tune resonating out of hibernation and over Catalan. The people of Prats-de-Mollo, and those of its neighboring valleys, find purgation in copious handfuls of holy soot, and lots of wine.

Finally, at the Place des Foiral, the village square, the bears’ only day comes to an end. Nearly everyone has been blackened. There are, however, about a dozen who’ve been whitened in flour and now enter the act: Barbers armed with axes, shaving brushes, and chains. The two creatures collide, and white and black entangle. The bears are panting, filthy, and desperate to escape. At last enchained, shaved, and castrated, savage nature has yet again been dominated and the death of winter ensures spring’s rebirth. I
look over at a Barber who smiles sickly, all the while waggling a moldy sausage in the air to bid me adieu.

Reflecting back on that day in the Catalan borderlands, I still feel a resurgence of terror, a sense of being caught dead in my tracks. Not knowing the layout of the village, being lost in the maze is confounding. Yet, for my part, the sense of awesome terror was provoked by that middleman, that shapeshifting blur that was hunting me, not in a real bear. Two-faced, a Janus interface on the threshold of sanity and insanity is the extinct Pyrenean bear and the culpable species, Homo sapiens – ‘wise man.’ For the better part of a day I felt as if I were prey. Maybe this is getting toward what Paul Shepard meant when he said, “The nightly chase across the sky, in which the bear is said by some peoples to be the prey and other the predator, constitutes in either case a kind of trophic metaphysics” (“Bear Essay” 5). In the fête de l’ours are “synergistic flow patterns of energy and life as food” (Shepard, “Bear Essay” 5). It’s Gary Snyder saying, “The real work is eating each other, I suppose” (Real 82). Realizing this, even if it’s by confronting a man-bear is a humbling thing.
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