

INTRODUCTION

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP and communities negotiate complex political, economic, and social relationships with the larger Canadian society. They do so from distinct histories and cultural perspectives. The articles in this issue explore how Aboriginal peoples of the Northwest Coast area have navigated archaeological classification, Christian missionization, and cultural representation. These practices are not just colonial forces of the past but, rather, converge with ongoing struggles for self-determination, the recognition of Aboriginal rights and title, and control over contemporary expressions of Native traditions, customs, and laws. The indigenous identities that are negotiated as a result of this demand are to be understood as both emerging from the past and oriented towards the future. As Dianne Newell and Dorothee Schreiber suggest in their article on a controversy over an ethnographic description of a 1987 potlatch, past anthropological practice and ongoing Native political efforts are closely linked through their joint interest in defining and representing the potlatch. With Melissa Meyer, Susan Neylan offers a history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Aboriginal brass bands on the north coast, showing not only how this cultural form emerged out of a particular colonial, Christian context but also how it is still relevant to community histories, memory, and commemoration. Brass bands acted as one of the “connective institutions” that strengthened existing social forms, created new ones, and, as in the case of playing for the McKenna-McBride Commission and touring representatives of the Queen, served to assert sovereignty and identity in the face of colonial challenges.

Susan Roy provides a history of the internationally celebrated archaeological site in Vancouver known as the Marpole Midden and reveals how the varied anthropological and popular theories regarding the

people who lived at such “prehistoric” sites – reinforced by the artistic rendering and museum display of “busts” from the skulls excavated from Marpole – distanced the local indigenous community from its own past. She shows how a shift occurred in the 1960s to the point where, today, the Musqueam First Nation draws on archaeological knowledge, sites, and cultural objects in its struggles for recognition of its long and continuous occupation of the land.

Through our treatment of the present-day negotiations about the meaning of past cultural practices and colonial histories, we show that *how* we understand and represent the past in the present, and the relationship between tradition and modernity, has important consequences for Native communities and Native-settler relations. Our writing of histories that address these issues suggests collaboration on several levels. Susan Neylan, with Melissa Meyer (who is from the Tsimshian Nation, Lax Kw’alaams/Port Simpson), treats collaboration as a research methodology. Their work is based on intensive “ethnohistorical” interviews with Tsimshian individuals, undertaken as a kind of collaboration between the two researchers. Additionally, Neylan and Meyer’s research on brass bands demonstrates how Native performative culture within the colonial context can also be a form of cultural collaboration within and beyond Native communities.

Susan Roy draws upon her relationship with the Musqueam First Nation to research and write within a consultative framework with the band. Both Roy’s “Who Were These Mysterious People?” and Newell and Schreiber’s “Collaborations on the Periphery” deal with the shifting relationship between archaeological or ethnological fieldworkers and First Nations communities and individuals – relationships that were sometimes collaborative and cooperative, sometimes uncomfortable and effectively one-sided. Matters of definition and legitimization, particularly those related to questions about who has the authority to represent culture, are never separate from Native peoples’ efforts to reassert jurisdiction over their traditional territories and cultural practices.

Collaboration in Aboriginal research therefore requires more than an equal relationship between an Aboriginal community or individual and an academic writer, and it cannot be reduced to jointly negotiated methodology. Despite the sometimes difficult relationships that arise when First Nations people read what anthropologists write or display, collaborations can be unintentional and unexpected. In highlighting the “failed collaboration” between prominent Kwakwaka’wakw community

member and educator Daisy Sewid-Smith and anthropologist Harry Wolcott, Newell and Schreiber underscore that writing about Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations is *inherently* a collaborative process. Consequently, they stress repoliticizing writing by giving attention to the unequal relationships between non-Native academics and Native communities as well as to larger questions about rights and title to territory. These rights and title to territory might refer to such diverse practices as brass bands travelling with chiefs to greet distinguished non-Native visitors, purchasing an archeological midden, or publicly criticizing academics over representations of the contemporary potlatch. In such debates and negotiations, Aboriginal people mobilize the past as a living part of the present and as a common aspect of their identities. It is clear that history does not simply emerge from historical writings: it is foregrounded in the larger forum of discussions, collaborations, and negotiations around how to interpret events, performances, objects, sites, and identities – a point that informs and links the three articles being offered here.

*Dianne Newell, Susan Neylan,
Susan Roy, and Dorothee Schreiber*