

COLLABORATIONS ON THE PERIPHERY:

The Wolcott-Sewid Potlatch Controversy

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE EARLY 1960s, Harry Wolcott taught school at Village Island, British Columbia, deep in Kwakwaka'wakw territory, as part of his doctoral studies in the anthropology of education.¹ Twenty-five years later, after having kept in contact with members of the (now displaced and scattered) Village Island, or Mamalilikala, community, he returned to Kwakwaka'wakw territory to attend James Sewid's potlatch. Harry Wolcott's invitation to the feast was owing to his long-time friendship with clan chief Henry Bell, formerly of Village Island and the head of one of the lineages of the Mamalilikala tribe. Henry Bell's death was, in part, the occasion for this potlatch; his Box of Treasures, which included not only his tangible wealth but also his songs, names, dances, and history, was to be formally passed on to a successor at this event. Before his death, he had placed these things "on the shoulders" of James Sewid, who was to find a successor for the clan chieftainship.

On his drive back to Oregon after the 1987 event, Wolcott apparently realized that his relationship to the community had been transformed at the potlatch by the "totally unexpected summons to participate in a dance."² At that moment, Wolcott later recalled, he was pulled into a "circle of 'legitimate peripheral participation,'" which gave him a good sense of the issues surrounding cultural continuity and the transmission of cultural knowledge in a post-potlatch ban era. It is important that Wolcott did not imagine himself to have been adopted by the tribe

¹ Harry F. Wolcott, "A Kwakiutl Village and Its School: Cultural Barriers to Classroom Performance" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1964); Harry F. Wolcott, *A Kwakiutl Village School* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967).

² Harry F. Wolcott, "Peripheral Participation and the Kwakiutl Potlatch," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 27, 4 (1996): 485.

or to be in any way Kwakiutl³ merely because he had been asked to perform a relatively simple dance; rather, he suddenly understood – and later interpreted through the clarifying lens provided by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s concept of “legitimate peripheral participation”⁴ – that the potlatch lives on not because of what one sees when one watches one of these events but because of the constellation of small-scale interactions that keep a great number of people connected to the potlatch through their “marginal” participation in it. Examples of such participation in a potlatch might include looking after the purchase of the gifts, brokering interpersonal tensions, self-consciously learning a dance and then teaching a youngster to follow in one’s footsteps, or simply wondering whether or not to attend at all. In Wolcott’s account, published in the *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* in 1996, this peripheral participation, he assures us, is not to be seen as a symptom of cultural disintegration but, rather, as “a heuristic notion for thinking about what most of us are up to most of the time in living our social lives” as learners participating in communities of practitioners.⁵

Wolcott’s article prompted the writing of three further articles: the response by Daisy Sewid-Smith (the daughter of the potlatch host), sharply criticizing Wolcott’s story; an open letter to Daisy Sewid-Smith and readers from Harry Wolcott; and the final comments of the journal editor. We see the four published pieces – Wolcott’s original paper, Daisy Sewid-Smith’s response, Wolcott’s rejoinder (which underscores the notion of collaboration as inherent in anthropological fieldwork and as a way of understanding and representing culture), and the editor’s attempt at closure – as a collaboration of sorts over how to represent the potlatch today. While commenting on the same event, the disparate accounts contain conflicting representations that make use of social and historical context in inconsistent and often contradictory ways. However, in the peripheral space of the journal, what could have been a dull dialogue over the finer points of the potlatch was deflected back onto the role of anthropology in relations between First Nations and the newcomers at the end of the twentieth century.

We see this present paper as one more response – one that reopens the “Wolcott-Sewid potlatch controversy” – by asking questions left

³ Harry Wolcott uses the older term “Kwakiutl” to refer to the Kwakwaka’wakw.

⁴ Lave subsequently rejected that terminology in favour of emphasizing “social participation, especially the *practice* that is the active element in it” and the “changing participation in the culturally designed settings of everyday life.” See Jean Lave, “The Practice of Learning,” in *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*, ed. Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5–6, qtd. in Wolcott, “Peripheral Participation,” 485.

⁵ Wolcott, “Peripheral Participation,” 486.

unanswered or suppressed in the original series of accounts. These include questions about the colonial histories and anti-colonial struggles that are recast in all four articles as questions of cultural purity, cultural change, and cultural authority and representation. We examine how history is relevant not as mere background but, rather, as an active force that coordinates the struggles over the representation of the potlatch – struggles that arose in the 1880s after the banning of the potlatch and that continue to the present day, long after the potlatch ban was dropped from the books in 1951. In trying to understand how relations between Native peoples and a settler society cut across representations of the potlatch, we ask which historical contexts are left unwritten in the original four articles and examine the consequences of those omissions for present-day Native-settler relations. Perhaps it is only possible to ask these questions because ten years have passed since the original publication of the articles; doing so includes us as original potlatch participants – albeit even more peripheral.

It is not surprising that questions over representation of the potlatch have arisen, given that there has been a long history of intense anthropological interest in this core institution of Northwest Coast societies and that the effect of white contact on the institution has been mixed. At a time when Canadians are attempting to resolve many of the long-standing claims of First Nations, the controversy over how to account for a *contemporary* potlatch makes light of the continued colonial tensions that structure Native/non-Native interactions. The matter of cultural representation is therefore considerably more complex than Harry Wolcott, Daisy Sewid-Smith, or the editor has presented it.

RETURNING THE ETHNOGRAPHIC GAZE:

DAISY SEWID-SMITH RESPONDS TO HARRY WOLCOTT

Despite the fact that Aboriginal people are increasingly able to challenge ethnographic accounts, it is still questionable whether their alternative accounts will be able to – or should – substitute for those of ethnographers in the courts and universities. While Native accounts may be said to represent an alternative, insider view, the question that lingers in the background of anthropological accounts remains: for what purpose and in what context were these alternate accounts written, and what do they imply for Native peoples not just as studied but also as colonized groups? The postmodernist desire to dismantle privileged islands of truth and objectivity by considering all accounts as equally constructed may be representative of a political irresponsibility that actively avoids

examining the present-day implications of differently constructed colonial histories. This inability to choose among what seems like an endless variety of different accounts has constrained discussion on controversies such as the one set in motion by Harry Wolcott in 1996. It also points to the need for criteria for evaluating Native community accounts that are published for academic audiences.

Nearly a decade has passed since the last sentence in the Wolcott-Sewid controversy was written, though Michael Marker recently drew attention to the exchange, calling it a “good example of discord between anthropologists and community-based Indigenous scholars” that breaks out when ethnographers discuss Native cultural practices “carelessly and disrespectfully.”⁶ But Wolcott avoids many obvious mistakes of carelessness and disrespect. He does not reveal private mythical, spiritual, or cultural knowledge, and in his focus on the mundane details, he refrains from aestheticizing Kwakwaka’wakw culture. His account does not remark on the exoticism of the regalia, the mythical forms, or even the details of ceremonial procedures. Moreover, Wolcott at least *points* to the historical links between the current cultural conditions in which the potlatch operates and the ways in which the events of an earlier colonial period on the Northwest Coast – the suppression of the potlatch until the early 1950s, the forced amalgamation of villages, and a parallel system of chiefs elected in accordance with the Indian Act – still have consequences today. Wolcott’s approach therefore seems to have opened up a space in which non-Native people can speak about the Kwakwaka’wakw without treating them as a colonial “other.” His treatment of the potlatch refrains from essentializing Kwakwaka’wakw people; instead, he describes people who are continuously interpreting and reinterpreting their beliefs and actions to meet particular personal ends, political ends, or, as is so often the case, a combination of the two.

Under the circumstances, what a surprise it must have been for Harry Wolcott – who had mailed Daisy Sewid-Smith an offprint of his published article and probably thought he had written an innocuous, personal account – to be faced with a scathing written critique by Daisy Sewid-Smith, a daughter of James Sewid and grandniece of Henry Bell, a member of the Mamalilikala tribe of Village Island, a trained specialist in Kwakwaka’wakw culture, an author, and a professional educator. Her reply in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* a year after the publication

⁶ Michael Marker, “Indigenous Voice, Community, and Epistemic Violence: The Ethnographer’s ‘Interest’ and What ‘Interests’ the Ethnographer,” *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, 3 (2003): 367.

of Wolcott's original article takes as its target one of anthropologists' most deep-seated fears: that their rapport with the community or their informants might one day be lost. To Sewid-Smith, Harry Wolcott was suddenly no longer "Harry" but "Dr. Wolcott," despite the fact that for the past thirty-five years she, had been calling him by his first name.⁷

Sewid-Smith refers to Wolcott as an outsider who has damaged the Kwakwaka'wakw ritual world through his representations in "Peripheral Participation."⁸ By understanding anthropology as a form of gossip, she recognizes anthropology as a form of social control. But in this case her culture protects her, and her noble status confers immunity from gossip: "any gossip or challenge you receive will just bounce off you," her father was told at an uncle's potlatch in 1976.⁹ Sewid-Smith uses the academic forum provided by the journal *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* as an extension of the sanctions available in her own community. Wolcott is now subject to a sort of academic gossip meant to marginalize and shame him as a person who, in having crossed "personal boundaries," is not *liłixs'ak^w* (well-lectured) but rather *lixs'ak^w* (void of wisdom).¹⁰ In addition to deploying academic writing as a mechanism of social sanction, Sewid-Smith's article also sets up an impressive visual display, filled with Kwak'wala words that are written using complicated diacritics and phonetic characters. These symbols, unlike those of a newer Kwak'wala writing system used by the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, are not available on an ordinary typewriter. Daisy Sewid-Smith's rebuke of Wolcott is written from within systems of local knowledge and authority that any anthropologist (much less Wolcott, who had been absent from the community for thirty-five years and, in any event, is not a specialist in Northwest Coast culture) would have difficulty in accessing and maintaining as his own.

Having established at the outset why she needs to speak up publicly against Wolcott's "inaccurate," "unvalidated," and even "insulting" theories and interpretations, Daisy Sewid-Smith's letter proceeds through the stages of identifying and validating its author as a "trained specialist who has the lineage and authority to speak as [she does],"¹¹ to a recounting of the historical events and the protocol-based preparations, to decisions behind James Sewid's last potlatch, and, finally, to her own

⁷ Harry F. Wolcott, "Open Letter to Daisy Sewid-Smith," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 28, 4 (1997): 605.

⁸ Daisy Ma'anił Sewid-Smith, "The Continuing Reshaping of Our Ritual World by Academic Adjuncts," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 28, 4 (1997): 594.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 599.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 594.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 595.

role as the appointed potlatch recorder and confidante to her father and Henry Bell. She ends by identifying the “reshaping of our ritual world by academic interpretations” such as Wolcott’s as the latest in a long line of struggles against prosecution that her people have had to face.¹²

Daisy Sewid-Smith’s response to Wolcott thus condemns not only Wolcott in particular but also anthropology in general. Given her protective stance – she claims that academics destabilize the potlatch, as “when a house is built on a foundation of sand, its structure is weak and unstable,”¹³ and that she has the authority to speak for the Kwakwaka’wakw – we would expect Sewid-Smith’s reply as an “insider” to put into historical context the economic and cultural conditions under which Kwakwaka’wakw people live today. Not only does she do nothing of the sort, but she confines her account of traditional culture to her own knowledge, or that of “the nobility.” In 1969, Vine Deloria, in *Custer Died for Your Sins*, produced a scathing indictment of anthropologists, in which he argued that anthropologists were for the most part self-serving and obsessed with trying to find “real” Indians beneath the poverty and social dysfunction of life on the reservation. But in the 1990s, it is the Kwakwaka’wakw expert Daisy Sewid-Smith, not the anthropologist Harry Wolcott, who in this case prevents real life from intruding on what are presented as timeless truths. It was this reversal of the traditional anthropologist-Native relationship that prompted us to look into the matter further.

The editor of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Kathryn Anderson-Levitt, who received Daisy Sewid-Smith’s reply, had not thought of Wolcott’s article as being about the potlatch at all. However, she apologized for the “pain” Wolcott’s article had caused, and she described Sewid-Smith’s traditional account as a contrast to the “partial portrait” of the potlatch offered by Harry Wolcott. At the same time, she left open the possibility that the sequences of articles and responses might “give scholars and students the occasion to reflect and debate on what counts as a true representation of a cultural event and who has the right to do the representing.”¹⁴ However, by framing the controversy as a matter of an anthropologist claiming to be able to speak *for* a First Nations community, Anderson-Levitt has effectively shut down debate on the matter. She gives a superficially neutral response – after all, we cannot ever really “know” indigenous people – a

¹² Ibid., 602.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt, “Editor’s Note: On ‘Peripheral Participation and the Kwakiutl Potlatch,’” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 28, 4 (1997): 593.

kind of reverse open-mindedness that presumes to be postcolonial but reveals that indigenous people continue to be unknowable and “other.” One of the techniques through which the state maintains that colonial distance, Barbara Saunders says, is through a discourse that centres on the idea that “they’re not our kind; we can’t understand their conflicts; our norms don’t apply to them.”¹⁵

This approach is politically dangerous because First Nations are not different because of something *within* them. First Nations, including the Kwakwaka’wakw, are different culturally, to be sure, but that culture has been shaped in ways that have to do with survival under conditions of forced assimilation. The struggle for Kwakwaka’wakw people to build a future for their descendants from lands that were never relinquished to the Crown has given them a culture of resistance that will probably continue until a just settlement over their land claims has been reached. Given this state of affairs, there is room for non-Native interpretations that take seriously the ethno-historical basis of contemporary cultural conditions. Michael Marker has argued that “the quality of research is not improved *simply* by having Aboriginal people doing the writing. It is improved by a more detailed analysis that includes the perspectives and location of both Natives and non-Natives. This means an analysis of history, hegemony, and self.”¹⁶

WOLCOTT: AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON THE SIDELINES

In his original article, Wolcott seems to have anticipated the problems surrounding representation when he mused that he was “not quite getting it right.”¹⁷ Wolcott’s record of the events of the potlatch differs from the records produced by the video photographers, who flooded the dancing and drumming areas with bright lights and “moved freely around the edge of the dance area in the semiauthoritative, semiapologetic manner of the serious amateur photographer”:¹⁸ Wolcott attended the potlatch not as an anthropologist or other official “recorder” of the events but, rather, as a guest who appropriately blended into the background. There, at his seat near the edge of the curtain from which the dancers entered,

¹⁵ Barbara Saunders, “From a Colonized Consciousness to Autonomous Identity: Shifting Relations between the Kwakwaka’wakw and Canadian Nations,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 22 (1997): 150.

¹⁶ Marker, “Indigenous Voice,” 367.

¹⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 29, qtd. in Wolcott, “Peripheral Participation,” 484.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 468.

he found himself to be both physically and socially on the periphery of the potlatch.

Unlike Wolcott, the video photographers had been “officially” permitted by the host family to record the potlatch: “Weeks before, a family agreement had been reached that any filming would be okay,” reports Wolcott.¹⁹ This shift from “an earlier reluctance about [the photographers’] intrusiveness,” however, does not mean that, like the photographers moving around the dance floor, Wolcott was free to produce his own version of the potlatch. The newfound confidence, on the part of First Nations, to be able to themselves control how representations of the potlatch are made, seems to have been a surprise for Wolcott. If the host family had wanted an ethnographic record of the potlatch, they probably would have arranged for one to be written. At a Tsimshian pole-raising feast in Kitsumkalum held about the same time as the Sewid potlatch under discussion here, the organizers invited the media, a local audio-visual company, and an ethnologist to record the event.²⁰ This strategy illustrates how anthropology is becoming an increasingly important part of Native peoples’ dialogues with the settler society. As they struggle to provide proof of cultural continuity in the courts, as well as to exercise their connection to territories through language and history, it seems only natural that First Nations should turn to new technologies of record-keeping and representation. It is therefore questionable whether anthropological work on the potlatch can ever again be done “from the sidelines.”

After suffering from years of overtly oppressive state tactics such as the potlatch ban, compulsory residential school attendance, and a prohibition against pursuing land claims, Northwest Coast First Nations have (since the 1950s) been able to vigorously pursue legal and (since the 1970s) political channels – and have done so. Old ethnographic accounts, such as those collected in Franz Boas’s fieldwork of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the testimony of present-day anthropologists, are important for the defence of Native territorial claims in court and are also used by Native people in “land claims” negotiations with governments; but these same accounts can be used to deny rights and claims. In the original trial in the landmark Aboriginal title case, *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* (1991), the Crown tried to argue that the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en (the plaintiffs) feasting traditions were

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ James McDonald, “Poles, Potlatches, and Public Affairs: The Use of Aboriginal Culture in Development,” *Culture* 10, 2 (1990): 108.

not uniquely indigenous and that, in any case, the “Indian way of life” was no longer distinctly Native.²¹ Ever since the Supreme Court of Canada decision in *R. v. Van der Peet* (1996), First Nations seeking legal recognition of their rights to resources have had to prove that their practices are defining characteristics of their culture and continuous with a pre-contact past; Aboriginal title is subject to the rigorous tests laid out in *Delgamuukw*, in which the use and occupation of lands must be proven to be continuous with the time of assertion of British sovereignty. Wolcott makes the potlatch appear not culturally distinct but simple, commonplace, and easy to understand from an outsider’s perspective. Perhaps this is why Sewid-Smith cannot, as she put it, “have Dr. Wolcott’s words be the only written record of this historic event.”²² Daisy Sewid-Smith’s response constantly reiterates the complexity of the potlatch protocols and the specificity of the history of the lineages and rights that were asserted at her father’s last potlatch.

This context repositions Daisy Sewid-Smith’s complaints from the private domain of individuals and families to the public domain of resistance against the assimilative pressures of the state and the heavy burden of proof on First Nations seeking recognition of their rights. Sewid-Smith’s claim that “as a trained potlatch recorder” she was taught to remain silent about her “sacred culture” is therefore confusing.²³ The journal editor, for her part, seemed unsure of how to resolve the situation, given Sewid-Smith’s claim to absolute authority and the very private nature of what the editor termed Sewid-Smith’s “pain.”²⁴ The editor therefore concluded that the truth of Wolcott’s article lies only in those elements that are not actually “about” the potlatch at all, since Wolcott’s article “was and is (also) a mediation on learning as peripheral participation.”²⁵

Anderson-Levitt’s editorial response is unlike that of Wendy Wickwire, a guest editor for *BC Studies*, who was faced with a situation in which a museum curator “wrote back” to protest an article by a Nuuchahnulth woman, Gloria Frank, critical of museum culture. Wickwire responded by saying that such criticisms as Frank’s are neither private reactions (like the pain to which Anderson-Levitt referred) nor abstract musings about theory. Furthermore, Wickwire suggested that

²¹ Arthur Ray, *I Have Lived Here since the World Began: An Illustrated History of Canada’s Native People* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1996), 363-4.

²² Sewid-Smith, “Continual Reshaping,” 598.

²³ *Ibid.*, 594.

²⁴ Anderson-Levitt, “Editor’s Note,” 593.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

anthropological description often reveals more about the particular moment in history when the work was done than it does about the cultures being depicted. The lifting of a barrier to true cooperation with Native peoples, Wickwire claims, would require “acceptance of a new representational paradigm that itself requires an attitudinal shift”: anthropologists must adopt a more respectful approach if they want their work to be accepted by Native people.²⁶ This proposal raises two questions: (1) what is Wolcott’s anthropological heritage in terms of theorizing and writing on the potlatch, and (2) does Daisy Sewid-Smith’s own anthropological account represent an attitudinal shift?

“WHY CAN’T WOLCOTT BE MORE LIKE FRANZ BOAS”?

Following his fieldwork at a Kwakiutl village in the early 1960s to complete his doctorate in anthropology at Stanford University, Wolcott moved on to a career in anthropology at the University of Oregon but maintained contact with the village community. Because of his friendship with Henry Bell, he was invited by the Sewid family to attend Henry Bell’s memorial potlatch, held in 1987. Wolcott’s obvious rapport with many Kwakiutl people, and his attention to “behind-the-scenes” events, allowed him to produce an account of that potlatch “just the way it is.” Stripped of references to ancient protocol and formal retellings of ancestral origins, the potlatch Wolcott describes is fluid, a place where people disagree, form new alliances, and/or cement old ones. It is also a place where people consciously accept, rediscover, or reject their Native heritage, both in the feast hall and around town during the multi-day feast – or so it appeared to Wolcott.

Daisy Sewid-Smith’s published response attempts to rescue her father’s potlatch not just from the subjective, academic account of Harry Wolcott but also from anthropological description more generally. Her attack on anthropology and “academic adjuncts” who continually reshape “our ritual world” spares only the leading figure in Northwest Coast ethnography, the famed Franz Boas, whom she indigenizes into Kwakiutl history by explaining that “anyone who would challenge” her great-grandfather’s status as a “real” clan chief “need only refer to the writings of the pioneer anthropologist Franz Boas, who met and recorded my great-grandfather . . . and his uncle.”²⁷ In fact, except for her references to receiving telephone calls, Sewid-Smith’s version of what

²⁶ Wendy Wickwire, “A Response to Alan Hoover,” *BC Studies* 128 (2000/01): 73.

²⁷ Sewid-Smith, “Continual Reshaping,” 596.

“really” happened before, during, and after her father’s potlatch might as well have been taken from a page of Franz Boas’s old ethnologies. In its concern with the intricate details of names, lineages, and strict, ancient protocols, her account sees the potlatch as a self-contained and internally consistent institution and, thereby, isolates it from interpretation by outsiders, particularly non-Native outsiders.

The similarities between the modern-day Daisy Sewid-Smith and the early anthropologist Franz Boas are particularly striking when one considers how they deal with matters of truth and falsehood, rumour and knowledge. Much like Sewid-Smith today, Boas was concerned with distinguishing primeval, and presumably “correct,” versions of art, history, and myth from the flights of fancy that individuals might undertake in reinterpreting that material to fit the circumstances of their everyday lives. Through his Kwakiutl informant, interpreter, and ethnographic assistant, George Hunt, Boas wanted to describe variation in cultural texts in order to uncover the original, “true” versions from which all the other accounts had been derived. Significantly, this did not mean that Boas was uninterested in the *variety* of accounts that existed within Kwakiutl society. On the contrary: the derivatives of stories of mythical encounters and tribal origins represented to Boas not only geographical variation but also internal innovation. Furthermore, this way of dealing with conflicting accounts was central to his understanding of cultural diffusion and his theories about the interplay of history and local meanings. As Regna Darnell has pointed out, this very explanation for diverse accounts allowed Boas to make a case against the idea of absolute historical accuracy in Native texts.²⁸ It is here that the similarities between Franz Boas and Daisy Sewid-Smith begin to fade. The gap between the writings of Boas and the assertions of Sewid-Smith in her response to Wolcott probably has something to do with the very different circumstances under which potlatch chiefs at the end of the twentieth century recounted the sources of their hereditary privileges and the history of their claims to them.

For Boas, there is no conflict between various accounts because “these contradictory traditions are the result of individual thought in each community, and do not come into conflict, because the audience identifies itself with the reciting chief, and the truth of one poetic creation does

²⁸ Regna Darnell, “Text, Symbol, and Tradition in Northwest Coast Ethnology from Franz Boas to Claude Levi-Strauss,” in *Coming to Shore: Northwest Coast Ethnology Traditions and Visions*, ed. Marie Mauzé, Michael E. Harkin, and Sergei Kan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 17.

not destroy the truth of the other one.”²⁹ Boas’s way of reconciling cultural continuity with the existence of disparate accounts assumes a degree of internal homogeneity that, even had it been present before contact, certainly no longer exists today. It is clear that, if the cultural cohesiveness reported by Boas did exist today, Wolcott would never have met the man in the cafe who was deciding whether to participate in the potlatch or to go to a bar, nor would members of the host family have needed name badges to identify each other at the potlatch. Sergei Kan, one of many anthropologists who has taken up the subject of the potlatch on the Northwest Coast, has said of the contemporary Tlingit potlatch that “it is very difficult to speak of a unified ‘culture’ shared more or less equally by every Tlingit. Instead, there are several cohorts whose values have been shaped by their experiences growing up and maturing in very different historical periods characterized by different socio-political and ideological processes and events in the larger American society.”³⁰

In the case of the Kwakwaka’wakw, a number of historical processes, including the forced amalgamation of villages, compulsory residential school attendance for generations of children, and surveillance by Indian agents, are left unaccounted for in Sewid-Smith’s reply. However, for the moment, we consider only why Daisy Sewid-Smith is so intent on overlooking – except in her single brief list of oppressive techniques and social pathology: “religious zealots,” “disease,” “encroachment and the laws of the newcomers,” “personal identity struggles,” and “diminished use of our precious language”³¹ – the changes in potlatch procedures that went along with participation in the white economy and the legal-administrative suppression of the potlatch. Even the matter of potlatch seats that became vacant as a consequence of disease, religious conversion, or the threat of prosecution becomes transformed in Sewid-Smith’s account into a matter of internal conflict that disrupted the cultural peace and continuity that characterized the past. “During the clash of the nobility and the commoners,” Sewid-Smith writes, “many have passed themselves off as nobility without the birthright and proper validation.”³² Throughout her article she contrasts the “real chiefs” and “real nobility,” with whom she identifies, with the “commoners”

²⁹ Darnell, “Text, Symbol, and Tradition,” 17-8.

³⁰ Sergei Kan, “Cohorts, Generations, and Their Culture: The Tlingit Potlatch in the 1980s,” *Anthropos* 84 (1989): 407.

³¹ Sewid-Smith, “Continual Reshaping,” 60r-2.

³² *Ibid.*, 596.

or “pretenders.” Sewid-Smith therefore sets out to rescue the potlatch from both anthropological study and her own community.

SEWID-SMITH SEEKS TO RESCUE THE POTLATCH FROM ANTHROPOLOGY AFTER BOAS

Central to understanding Daisy Sewid-Smith’s attempt to rescue the potlatch from Wolcott’s early 1990s description of it in a major journal of anthropology is the problem of what she is trying to rescue the potlatch *from*. Sewid-Smith depicts the potlatch as adhering to “strict customs and traditions,” a characterization with which she believes Boas would have agreed.³³ This distinguishes her account from those of the anthropologists who came after Boas, such as Helen Codere, Philip Drucker, Ronald Rohner, Wayne Suttles, and Sergei Kan. These portrayed the potlatch as much less fixed and invariable. The effects of participation in the white economy are absent from Boas’s writings but are very much foregrounded in the mid-twentieth-century writings on the potlatch by Drucker and Codere. As Wayne Suttles suggests, presenting the potlatch in its traditional setting is a tricky affair for the “setting” is never fixed: “Practices that might be called traditional in the 1990s were innovations in the 1890s, when George Hunt was recording traditions from the early nineteenth century.”³⁴ Although Boas had direct experiences with the acculturation of the Kwakiutl, he did not introduce these into his ethnographic writings.³⁵ When Helen Codere entered the anthropological scene in the 1950s to revisit Boas’s journals and consider the effects of Native participation in the cash economy, a fundamental contradiction in the persistence of the potlatch traditions became evident: success in the potlatch depended directly on success in the non-Native economy.³⁶

³³ *Ibid.*, 598.

³⁴ Wayne Suttles, “Streams of Property, Armor of Wealth: The Traditional Kwakiutl Potlatch,” in *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch*, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 133.

³⁵ See Philip Drucker and Robert F. Heizer, *To Make My Name Good: A Re-Examination of the Southern Kwakiutl Potlatch* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 13; and George W. Stocking, Jr., *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 86.

³⁶ Helen Codere, *Fighting with Property: A Study of Kwakiutl Potlatching and Warfare, 1792-1930* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1950). And see Douglas Cole, “The History of the Kwakiutl Potlatch,” in *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch*, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 135; and Douglas Cole and Ira Chaikin, *An Iron Hand upon the People: The Law against the Potlatch on the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990), 62 and 65.

LEGACY OF THE POTLATCH BAN AS SHARED HISTORY

The widely accepted observation that potlatching flourished on contact with the industrial economy, and especially under the constant threat of the potlatch ban's enforcement, has allowed the field of anthropology to create a space for fieldworker anthropologists, such as Wolcott, who employ a participant observation approach to comment on the potlatch and its contemporary manifestations. If resistance to the potlatch ban and the persistence of the custom under difficult and changing circumstances is a part of Native culture, then the potlatch is part of a shared history of Native-white relations.

It is precisely this opportunity for intervention by non-Native historians and anthropologists that threatens the timeless cultural authority that Sewid-Smith claims privileges her own account. Drucker and Heizer explained as early as 1967, for example, that after the famous crackdown against the potlatch in 1921, the Kwakwaka'wakw chiefs resident in Alert Bay met and decided that, since the public assembly element of the potlatch would have to be eliminated, gifts would be distributed by going from house to house.³⁷ Houses at this point followed the single-family house model imposed by missionaries and Indian agents. The gift distribution occurred not in order of rank but starting at one end of the village and ending at the other, and the hereditary privileges and reasons for giving the potlatch were presented privately. Since the potlatch ban required "an assembly of Indians" as proof of the illicit event, this Kwakiutl innovation made it practically impossible for white officials to get a conviction through the courts. Although this system worked well enough in terms of avoiding prosecution, observe Drucker and Heizer, it had a number of unintended cultural consequences: "An unforeseen result of this has been that many of the younger people do not know the dances and other privilege displays, nor do they know the real order of precedence of the chiefs ... some of them do not even know their own names – that is, the formal ones associated with the ranked positions – when they attend feasts and potlatches given at the remoter villages."³⁸

Daisy Sewid-Smith claims that, as an individual, she is a repository of cultural knowledge, and she does not see the need to collaborate with those Kwakwaka'wakw who have different interpretations of the contemporary potlatch: their challenges simply "bounce off" her and, in turn,

³⁷ For a recounting and interpretation of the crackdown, see Tina Loo, "Dan Cranmer's Last Potlatch," *Canadian Historical Review* 73 (1990): 125-41.

³⁸ Drucker and Heizer, *To Make My Name Good*, 88.

disgrace the challenger.³⁹ Those who do not have the cultural knowledge to participate fully in the potlatch or follow different protocols (such as those surrounding the mourning period required for a chief's family) are dismissed as "commoners" and "pretenders."⁴⁰ The wielding of power through cultural knowledge, or the assertion of cultural knowledge, which is a process that we detect in Sewid-Smith's rejoinder to Wolcott, seems to be a strong dynamic in the Kwakwaka'wakw community of the Campbell River area. As Marie Mauzé reports, a large number of Kwakwaka'wakw community members feel excluded from the cultural life surrounding the Kwagiulth Museum at Cape Mudge (adjacent to Campbell River), and this exclusion, according to local participants, "has to do with the fact that 'some people know about their culture; some don't.'"⁴¹ It is also a feature of the more northern communities of Alert Bay and Fort Rupert. This darker side of high status, or the assertion of high status outside the traditional forums, has little to do with ownership of chiefly prerogatives and much to do with controlling speech and advancing one's family at the expense of others; as Bruce Miller has pointed out, this process is characteristic not only of the Sewid family but also of families in several Northwest Coast communities.⁴²

Most fluent speakers of Kwak'wala are elderly, and most of those who are exceptionally knowledgeable about their history and practices are also elderly. Under these circumstances, age appears to have supplanted nobility in defining access to knowledge about the history of ancestral privileges and how they are properly displayed and validated. When there is uncertainty or disagreement about cultural practices, it is often the "elders" – those who still remember grandparents living lives relatively free of interference from non-Native laws – who are called on for help. This is also true for other Northwest Coast peoples. When the Tsimshian community of Kitsumkalum was trying to organize the pole-raising ceremony we touched on earlier, for example, it was the elders who were consulted to provide cultural expertise and to resolve disagreements within the community. Throughout the event, the elders were shown a "type of deference, which traditionally was reserved for the nobles and other titleholders."⁴³

³⁹ Sewid-Smith, "Continual Reshaping," 599.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 596.

⁴¹ Marie Mauzé, "Two Kwakwaka'wakw Museums: Heritage and Politics," *Ethnohistory* 50, 3 (2003): 509.

⁴² Bruce Miller, "Review: *Paddling to Where I Stand: Agnes Alfred, Qwiqwasutinuxw Noblewoman*, edited by Martine J. Reid and translated by Daisy Sewid-Smith," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 29, 2 (2005): 149–51.

⁴³ McDonald, "Poles, Potlatching, and Public Affairs," iii.

Daisy Sewid-Smith, however, speaks not about elders but about bloodlines,⁴⁴ kin relationships,⁴⁵ and ancestral lineages.⁴⁶ The “sense of urgency” with which she was taught about the potlatch⁴⁷ came from the nobility, and travelled through specific family relationships, rather than emanating from an undifferentiated body of elders. However, Sewid-Smith’s substitution of commoners as a category to be blamed for cultural disintegration is worrisome because it shifts attention away from questions about land, educational assimilation, and resources and, instead, focuses on internal factional disputes, without recognizing that these internal disputes are themselves affected by links to non-Native society. As access to natural resources and money is disconnected from ancestral privileges, a new nobility (that may or may not have links to the old nobility) is emerging, in which status is associated with the money, privileges, and authority that come from administering band funds and cooperating with the administrative structures of the Indian Act.

What Daisy Sewid-Smith may be opposing, in ways that are connected to her dislike of anthropological descriptions of the contemporary potlatch, is the democratization of the potlatch, which anthropologists and historians note occurred during and after its suppression. Helen Codere, in “Kwakiutl: Traditional Cultures” (1961), was perhaps the first to link the demographic decline of the Kwakiutl, and their newfound wealth from non-indigenous sources, to the participation in the potlatch of people who had never before had access to ranking positions.⁴⁸ The individualizing tendency in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century potlatch was an outgrowth of this democratizing trend, so that it was no longer the hereditary and, by extension, cosmological relationships that formed the basis of a person’s status but, rather, their ability to amass wealth. Drucker and Heizer saw this change as significant because their informants Ed Whonnuck and Charles E. Nowell *themselves* saw it as a break from the past: “the informants themselves regarded this as a change from the traditional method in which the value of the gift was directly proportional to, and only to, the relative rank of the recipient.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, they note, while allowing the means to be individualized and democratized, the Kwakiutl held

⁴⁴ Sewid-Smith, “Continual Reshaping,” 596.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 597.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 595.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 597.

⁴⁸ See Helen Codere, “Kwakiutl: Traditional Culture,” in Wayne Suttles, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 7: *Northwest Coast* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 369.

⁴⁹ Drucker and Heizer, *To Make My Name Good*, 38.

to “their system of formal social rank, which it was the basic function of the potlatch to define.”⁵⁰

This legacy of individualization and its complexities is hidden under the surface in Daisy Sewid-Smith’s elaborate account. In describing the history of the succession of Chief Henry Bell’s clan chieftainship, she remarks that James Sewid would choose a successor who would “be financially able to uphold his uncle’s Clan Chieftainship through the many Potlatches and responsibilities required of him.”⁵¹ Although her statement seems to suggest that it was Henry Bell’s successor’s individual wealth that made him an appropriate choice, Sewid-Smith also chooses to present the succession as a manifestation of ancient protocols and strict customs and traditions. However, this strategy makes her denial of a significant mainstream economic component to the potlatch unconvincing, and it leaves unanswered questions about what effect the secularization of the potlatch, through increasing emphasis on wealth, means for the potlatch today.

Henry Bell had told Harry Wolcott that “it’s no use giving a potlatch anymore,” a statement that Wolcott, pursuing his “legitimate peripheral participation” framework, took to refer to Bell’s “ambivalence toward potlatching and [decision] ... to forgo the tradition.”⁵² Daisy Sewid-Smith, however, took this same statement to refer to Bell’s dissatisfaction with “a grossly misunderstood economic system we call Pøssa,” an investing institution that she says operates differently from the potlatch system and one that the young people do not understand.⁵³ She rescues the memory of her great-uncle from any suggestion of cultural despondency – he had after all told Wolcott that “the old people don’t do it; so nobody pays you back, and the young people don’t even understand what it’s all about”⁵⁴ – by describing Bell’s own struggle “to keep the culture alive.”⁵⁵ This struggle was presumably a solitary one, joined perhaps by other members of the “nobility,” but otherwise a matter of rising above the legacy of oppression and maintaining untarnished versions of old beliefs.

Even if the anthropologists Drucker and Codere were terribly wrong in their individual assessments of the system of interest and repayment that accompanied the boom in potlatching, the focus of these anthro-

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

⁵¹ Sewid-Smith, “Continual Reshaping,” 598.

⁵² Wolcott, “Peripheral Participation,” 470.

⁵³ Sewid-Smith, “Continual Reshaping,” 601.

⁵⁴ Wolcott, “Peripheral Participation,” 470, qtd. in Sewid-Smith, “Continual Reshaping,” 601.

⁵⁵ Sewid-Smith, “Continual Reshaping,” 601.

pologists on the colonial context allows us to formulate questions that Daisy Sewid-Smith suppresses and at which Harry Wolcott only hints. For example, how have changes to the context and procedures of the potlatch made some Kwakwaka'wakw define wealth and success not in terms of the potlatch but, rather, in terms to which members of white society could relate? Is ambivalence towards the potlatch related to the disconnect between Kwakwaka'wakw forms of authority and the forces actually controlling people's lives, including their access to cash? Wolcott suggests that the imposed electoral system and forced amalgamation of outlying villages with villages in places whites could easily monitor and administer could create confusion over succession. But what does this state of affairs mean with regard to how young people interpret the significance of what goes on at a potlatch? Do the rights and privileges asserted at a potlatch mean anything in practical terms? In other words, are they assertions of rights to land and resources that are recognized under Canadian law? Can the conflicting views of community members help us to understand the meaning of the potlatch in interactive rather than in rigid functional or structural terms?⁵⁶ How does contemporary conversion to the potlatch compare with past movements out of the potlatch? In other words, does rejoining the potlatch tradition represent a simple reversal of the oppression under which many "left" the potlatch?

Since these questions lie outside the realm of her "traditional" record of what happened at her father's last potlatch, Daisy Sewid-Smith is able to avoid asking the questions that lurk in the background of her article. Her claim that traditional Kwakwaka'wakw people, and especially the "nobility," do not usually "respond publicly to criticism or gossip outside the ... Big House"⁵⁷ seems to further depoliticize her account. However, in our view, this is precisely where her attempt to invalidate Harry Wolcott's article goes wrong. Wolcott subtly points this out when he comments that "anyone who has Kwakiutl friends will recognize just how genuinely Kwakiutl you are by the nature of the concerns you express and the manner in which you express them."⁵⁸ Daisy Sewid-Smith's criticism is not an isolated attempt to regain control over the means by which the potlatch has been represented. During the years that the potlatch ban was in effect, and since the dropping of the ban, Kwakwaka'wakw and other coastal Native peoples have recognized the injustice of false representations and have made efforts to replace

⁵⁶ Wolcott, "Peripheral Participation," 475; and see Kan, "Cohorts, Generations, and Their Culture," 407.

⁵⁷ Sewid-Smith, "Continual Reshaping," 594.

⁵⁸ Wolcott, "Open Letter," 605.

them with more truthful representations. For example, a group of Kwakwaka'wakw sent a letter to the deputy superintendent of Indian Affairs in Ottawa in 1919 to protest against the potlatch prohibition: "We have been appointed a committed [sic] by our people and we think that if you understood our customs from the beginning that you would amend the law to allow us to go on in our old way. In order to let you know how it was carried on and why it was done we are sending you this letter."⁵⁹ For missionaries and government officials, the ability to define what the potlatch actually *was* was crucial to their ability to gain control over Native people's forms of economic and political expression – in fact, many attempts at potlatch convictions failed because the law had not properly defined this complex institution.⁶⁰

The Kwakwaka'wakw were among the strongest to resist the potlatch ban; they were able to achieve this by finding creative ways of circumventing the potlatch law and by using the potlatch to strengthen their links to the non-Native economy. When the ban was dropped in 1951, they sought to repatriate the potlatch regalia and used the museums they had to build as vehicles of cultural renewal, a point to which we return towards the end of our discussion.⁶¹ In the 1980s, the Alert Bay Kwakwaka'wakw community fought against substandard and racist health care practices,⁶² and, more recently, Kwakwaka'wakw people (though not the Sewid family) have been opposing the placement of fish farms in their traditional territories.⁶³ All of these initiatives required that Kwakwaka'wakw people assert who they are in the face of contemporary colonial discourses of progress and assumptions about the inevitable decline of the Native way of life. It is therefore from within this context that we must understand Daisy Sewid-Smith's criticism of Wolcott's writing.

⁵⁹ Library and Archives of Canada, RG-10, "Potlatch file," May 1913–December 1924, vol. 12336, 6 April 1919.

⁶⁰ Cole and Chaikin, *An Iron Hand upon the People*, 25–39.

⁶¹ Mauzé, "Two Kwakwaka'wakw Museums."

⁶² Dara Culhane, *An Error in Judgment: The Politics of Medical Care in an Indian/White Community* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987).

⁶³ Dorothee Schreiber and Dianne Newell, "Why Spend a Lot of Time Dwelling on the Past? Understanding Resistance to Contemporary Salmon Farming in Kwakwaka'wakw Territory," in *Pedagogies of the Global: Knowledge in the Human Interest*, ed. Arif Dirlik (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2006), 217–32; and see also Dorothee Schreiber and Dianne Newell, "Negotiating TEK in BC Salmon Farming: Learning from Each Other or Managing Tradition and Eliminating Contention?" *BC Studies* 150 (Summer 2006): 79–102.

HOW DOES THE ANTHROPOLOGIST
RESPOND TO THE “INSIDER’S” CRITICISM?

Wolcott does a fine job of putting us “into touch with the lives of strangers,”⁶⁴ as Clifford Geertz puts it, because he sees the extraordinary in the mundane things people say as well as in the things they do not say, as in the case of Henry Bell’s aging and oldest living son “Si,” whom Wolcott says brought the potlatch proceedings to a near standstill by passively remaining seated.⁶⁵ Wolcott’s account is a remarkable improvement over the uninterpreted texts of Boas, which contain no contextual information to help us understand how the potlatch operated in practice. But some of the ways in which Wolcott represents the potlatch make it seem not quite intact. For example, Wolcott wrote that he ran into a thirty-year-old grandson of Henry Bell in the hotel coffee shop, where the young man told him that he had scarcely attended the potlatch because he had been “partying” the night before and that he planned to drink more later that day. Daisy Sewid-Smith took the setting of the conversation to have been a “beer parlor,” and this error was not corrected by either Wolcott or the editor in their subsequent commentaries. Sewid-Smith writes that “it is the highest insult to our culture to choose a beer parlor setting, for example, to elicit research for future academic use”; however, given her error, it appears that her real concern is as much over the innuendos of alcoholism and general social decay that the retelling of this interaction contains as it is about the slight she felt as a tutored “daughter of a clan chief” and “trained potlatch recorder” whom Wolcott failed to consult.⁶⁶ An ethnography by Crisca Bierwert faced a similar critique from Jo-ann Archibald of the Stó:lō Nation, who claimed that Bierwert’s book on the Stó:lō and Coast Salish presented people as “fraught with family violence, as suffering exceptionally low employment, and as wrestling with never-ending fishing issues.” “Yes, there are problems,” Archibald wrote in her review of the book, “but much is being done to create a better Stó:lō life.”⁶⁷

The potlatch may not be the total social institution it was before the nineteenth century, during the nineteenth century, or in the twentieth century, but it is still an important source of political power and debate within Kwakwaka’wakw communities. The “generational effects”

⁶⁴ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 16.

⁶⁵ Wolcott, “Peripheral Participation,” 475.

⁶⁶ Sewid-Smith, “Continual Reshaping,” 594-5.

⁶⁷ Jo-ann Archibald, “Review: *Brushed by Cedar, Living by the River: Coast Salish Figures of Power*, by Crisca Bierwert,” *BC Studies* 124 (2000): III.

Wolcott refers to in his open-letter response to Daisy Sewid-Smith are an important component of these internal struggles: they are not simply a matter of cultural learning being passed down over time through peripheral participation.⁶⁸ These generational effects go back to the early potlatch-ban era, when the lineage chiefs of the Kwakwaka'wakw still had considerable influence and were able to maintain this influence by potlatching. The older chiefs, who were the most defiant of the potlatch ban, compelled younger people to continue to participate. Forrest LaViolette reports that, as late as 1946, Mrs. Stephen Cook of Alert Bay complained that her sons had been "chased from the fishing grounds because they would not potlatch."⁶⁹

Wolcott's confidence that the potlatch will endure – he seems to believe that this can happen even without any concerted effort – does not distinguish between a culturally quaint but ineffective ceremony, and a transformed but politically powerful potlatch tradition. A consciously reinvented tradition might be able to deal with questions about the continuing legacy of non-Native control over education, territorial government, and resources. For example, it is unlikely that most of the young people would have understood the Kwak'wala that was spoken at James Sewid's 1987 potlatch. This raises questions about the differences between how they and their elders would have interpreted transfers of power and various ritual elements. In this case, a lack of clear agreement is not necessarily a sign of vitality.

If rights to resources affirmed through the potlatch were recognized provincially and federally, it would be difficult to certify as valid an account of the potlatch that was rejected by the community (assuming that Daisy Sewid-Smith officially speaks for the community) but defended by a non-Native viewer as just his or her own "point of view." In the meantime, Sewid-Smith and Wolcott will be caught in a battle over words and representations that may nevertheless shape the struggle for self-determination, recognition of unextinguished Aboriginal title, and a justly negotiated treaty.

STRANGE COLLABORATORS

Wolcott's reply to Daisy Sewid-Smith's response to the editor underscores the notion that collaboration is inherent in anthropological fieldwork and has an important contribution to make in understanding

⁶⁸ Wolcott, "Open Letter," 604.

⁶⁹ Forrest E. LaViolette, *The Struggle for Survival: Indian Cultures and the Protestant Ethic in British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 86.

and representing culture. His letter is as imbued with familiarity (he refers, for example, to James Sewid and Henry Bell as “Jimmy” and “Henry”) as hers is with formality. She signs her response with her Kwak’wala name, Maʔaniṭ. Wolcott does not refer to her by this name in his original article. He does not do so in his subsequent open letter to her either, even though she is demanding to be recognized and respected as a noblewoman and as the potlatch recorder of her clan. Even the editor, Kathryn Anderson-Levitt, who affirms Daisy Sewid-Smith as the authority on the matter, never uses the name Maʔaniṭ when referring in her commentary to Sewid-Smith. Yet Wolcott still implies that they are collaborators of sorts simply by virtue of years of close contact in the community.

For Wolcott, using the name Maʔaniṭ might have implied deferring to someone claiming to be an expert, which would have put his own expertise in question. Such differential status could have meant losing the sense of rapport so central to anthropological fieldwork and through which the ethnographer immerses her/himself in Native life. Wolcott also claims surprise at Sewid-Smith’s referring to him, for the first time ever, as “Dr.” (This could be an exaggerated sign of her respect, or, as we suggested earlier, an attempt to further distance herself from his observations and conclusions – an attempt that he clearly intends to rebuff. Wolcott admits that he is neither a Northwest Coast specialist nor an expert on the potlatch, and, at any rate, he claims in his rejoinder that his is merely one account among many.)⁷⁰ If Sewid-Smith wanted to get her own story across, writes Wolcott, she could rest assured that she has now fulfilled that desire – and more, for she has, in a sense, upstaged the anthropologist, and this is the note on which Wolcott ends his reply to Sewid-Smith: “Even with your brief addendum, however, there is no longer any concern that my words might provide the only written account of your father’s last potlatch and this memorial tribute to my much-admired friend Henry Bell.”⁷¹ In the end, there is no collaboration (or need of one) – only, apparently, countless points of view on the potlatch, including his and hers, told in tandem.

Was collaboration necessary to Wolcott’s scholarly objectives? Apparently not, for his reply hints (“the fine points of a potlatch are not the focus of the writing”)⁷² and the editor states categorically that Wolcott’s journal piece was not intended as a potlatch paper per se. Since she chose to ignore

⁷⁰ Wolcott, “Open Letter,” 603.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 605.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 604.

the peer review process, in which at least one reviewer had recognized the paper as an analysis of a modern potlatch that “trivialized” the ceremony, and opted instead for (the author’s) revisions, which focused on advancing contemporary theories regarding learning as peripheral participation, Kathryn Anderson-Levitt freely admits to having been complicit in creating Daisy Sewid-Smith’s pain.⁷³ Having allowed the anthropologist and the official representative Native their say, and then taken the editorial last word, the editor offers Sewid-Smith a personal apology and calls an unequivocal end to further discussion of the matter.

In his own defence, Wolcott generalizes the phenomenon when he points Sewid-Smith in the direction of Caroline Brettell’s *When They READ What We WRITE: The Politics of Ethnography*, which examines the “native and potentially critical readership” that emerged beginning in the late 1970s. This readership is what Brettell, citing Marcus and Fisher, describes as a “powerful incentive”

to the contemporary experimental impulse in anthropological writing, both as ethnography and cultural critique. Presumably ... members of other societies, increasingly literate, will read ethnographic accounts that concern them and will react not only to the manifest descriptions of their own societies, but also to the premises about our society that are embedded in the double vision of any ethnographic work.⁷⁴

Brettell’s collection represents an early 1990s attempt by the field of anthropology to air the personal stories of those anthropologists who had, as she puts it, “the experience of having the distance between their audience of colleagues and their audience of informants eroded, of having ... ‘the natives talk back.’”⁷⁵ It is the Brettell collection – with its chapters on “prepublication responses [to ethnographic texts] that were unexpected and often painful” to the authors⁷⁶ and its chapters on those ethnographers who return to study communities only to find that many informants and friends feel betrayed – that Harry Wolcott cites to Daisy Sewid-Smith as a last resort in his attempt to accommodate her claim as the official potlatch recorder of her clan. It is as though he is saying that what she is going through is nothing new to anthropologists: indeed, it is a recognized phenomenon being studied and published about within anthropology. Sewid-Smith is, in this context, presumably

⁷³ Anderson-Levitt, “Editor’s Note,” 593.

⁷⁴ Caroline B. Brettell, “Introduction: Fieldwork, Text, and Audience,” in *When They READ What We WRITE: The Politics of Ethnography*, ed. C.B. Brettell (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1993), 2-3.

⁷⁵ Brettell, “Introduction,” 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

one of those who contribute to this contemporary “crisis” in ethnographic consciousness because she is one of those “ethnographic others” who “presume to criticize her characterization and to clamour for the right to represent herself.” Under the circumstances, asserts Brettell, quoting Stephen Tyler, “Pity the poor ethnographer.”⁷⁷

Bruce Rigsby suggests that, in today’s climate of Aboriginal rights and expert reports produced by ethnographers, it is critical that ethnographers carefully examine the nature of the authority to represent as well as the differential nature of the representation. He reminds them that the methodology of participant observation used by social anthropologists provides unique insights into a community that may be at odds with the representations or view of culture that members of the community “believe and present themselves as holding and observing,” but that this disconnect is perfectly understandable and defensible.⁷⁸ Participant observation fieldwork in a community depends on anthropologists’ spending a long, intensive period talking to people and listening to what they have to say, “so that they can gain access to its range of social life, mundane and not-so-mundane,” observing daily life and participating in it, and then, ideally, revisiting and maintaining contact with the community to gain “insights and perspective” into observable social and cultural change.⁷⁹ Rigsby cautions that it is important for anthropologists to critically observe the variance between the views of a particular culture held by social anthropologists and those held by members of the community being studied. While, on the one hand, members of the community could be pained or angered by anthropologists’ views of their culture, on the other hand, people’s representation of their contemporary culture and society are often “objectified,” “ideologised” or “fetishised,” and this phenomenon bears critical analysis.⁸⁰

I use these phrasings *fetishised* and *ideologised representations of culture* in a consciously pejorative manner because we need to watch out for them, identify them and expose them for analysis and comment

⁷⁷ Ibid., 3. A related phenomenon barely raised in Brettell but present at the time of publication is the concomitant rise at the margins of the discipline of “indigenous anthropologists,” self-reflective and critical, who heighten the challenges to what Matti Bunzl suggests is anthropology’s old operative assumption: the “Self/Other dyad in terms of the Western/non-Western dichotomy.” See Matti Bunzl, “Foreword to Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other/Syntheses of a Critical Anthropology*,” in Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xix.

⁷⁸ Bruce Rigsby, “Representations of Culture and the Expert Knowledge and Opinions of Anthropologists,” opening address, Adelaide Native Title Conference, Australia, 6-7 July 2001, 6. <http://www.aas.asn.au/adelconf/Rigsby.pdf>. Viewed 7 April 2006.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 6.

wherever we can, among ourselves as well as among others. That is because they divert our attention, they befuddle us and they mystify important issues and questions.⁸¹

Wolcott's recognition of the importance of grounding accounts in the concerns of one's informants is expressed at the end of his rejoinder, where he invites Daisy Sewid-Smith to tell the readers more about her "own incorporation into potlatch traditions."⁸² However, it is unlikely, given the internal political context from within which Sewid-Smith writes, that she would be able to depersonalize such an account. Daisy Sewid-Smith has been heavily involved in charting a course for the Kwagiulth Museum at Cape Mudge, near Campbell River, and her book, *Prosecution or Persecution*, in which she recounts the infamous crackdown on Dan Cranmer's potlatch in 1921, was prepared to coincide with the opening of the museum in 1979.⁸³ James Clifford notes how the Cape Mudge museum is organized around family ownership, and Mauzé adds that the exhibits display the masks and other artefacts in a way that emphasizes their ownership by individuals and their families while, at the same time, reinforcing the local hierarchy (i.e., nobility over commoners).⁸⁴

The U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, on the other hand, presents its half of the potlatch collection as a symbol of the potlatch's revival, and as a way of recognizing colonial history in a way that bears witness to the Kwakwaka'wakw people's ongoing struggle against assimilation.⁸⁵ The first curator of the museum, Gloria Cranmer-Webster, who is the great-granddaughter of George Hunt and a direct descendent of Dan Cranmer, has written about the contemporary potlatch in a matter-of-fact way. She describes, for example, how the coordination involved in preparing thousands of sandwiches seems to surface only during potlatch time. In the usual meeting of the host family, prior to any potlatch, "there is an appeal for all to work together, because we are now so few, so poor, and so weak in our world that what we are able to do is only a shadow of what we used to be."⁸⁶ Instead of presenting the

⁸¹ Ibid., "Representations of Culture," 7.

⁸² Wolcott, "Open Letter," 605.

⁸³ Daisy Sewid-Smith, *Prosecution or Persecution* (Cape Mudge, BC: Nu-Yum-Balees Society, 1979).

⁸⁴ James Clifford, "Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Politics and Poetics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 226-32; Mauzé, "Two Kwakwaka'wakw Museums," 506-10.

⁸⁵ See Clifford, "Four Northwest Coast Museums," 233-41; Mauzé, "Two Kwakwaka'wakw Museums," 510-13.

⁸⁶ Gloria Cranmer-Webster, "Contemporary Potlatch," in *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch*, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 232.

potlatch as a timeless, unchanging institution, as does Sewid-Smith, Cranmer-Webster wonders what her ancestors would say if alive today: “Would they be able to recognize what we do as being related to what they did? Would they pity us for having lost so much, or be proud that we are still here?”⁸⁷

PERIPHERAL COLLABORATION

It is difficult to say, based solely on the political differences between the two women, whether an exchange between Gloria Cranmer-Webster and Harry Wolcott would have been more or less collaborative than was that between Wolcott and Sewid-Smith. Cranmer-Webster makes her own remarks about anthropologists, joking that families who don’t have an anthropologist can order one from the “rent-an-anthro” agency because every potlatch should have one.⁸⁸ One thing is certain, however: as long as anthropologists are involved in representing the potlatch, these accounts will be scrutinized in Northwest Coast communities (a point that anthropologists have begun to take seriously). The “peripheral collaboration” between Wolcott and Sewid-Smith, as we chose to frame the process that occurred in the peripheral space of the *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, suggests that questions about what the potlatch really *is* are important for what they say about Kwakwaka’wakw people’s ongoing relationship to the newcomers.

Given that the legacy of the potlatch ban is part of a shared history, there is clearly a need for collaboration between Native and non-Native people regarding how to represent and to understand contemporary potlatches. This implies that writing about the potlatch does not become collaborative simply through relying on the “correct,” traditionally trained informants – an approach Daisy Sewid-Smith suggests would have solved the problems with Wolcott’s account. Daisy Sewid-Smith claims not to see the need for a collaboration (beyond anthropologists’ getting the right information from the right people, or, in other words, consulting people like her); however, the fact that she is writing back to an academic journal turns her into a de facto participant in an academic debate. The individualist spirit in anthropology – of the lone fieldworker and the Native informant (often her/himself marginal within the community) – on both sides of the Native-anthropologist divide can become more collaborative when writing about the contemporary potlatch is

⁸⁷ Ibid., “Contemporary Potlatch,” 248.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 232.

repoliticized and attention is given not only to the unequal relationships between non-Native academics and Native communities (i.e., to the politics of ethnology) but also to larger questions about rights and title to land.⁸⁹ When these larger questions are sidelined by being relegated to the past, or by being rejected as improper for examination by non-Native academics, no real collaboration can take place.

Wolcott is no stranger to controversy, and some of the criticisms he has endured as a methodologist are mirrored in the responses of Daisy Sewid-Smith and the journal editor to his potlatch article. On an earlier occasion he adopted the view of Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman, who say that “fieldwork can, at bottom, be considered as an act of betrayal, no matter how well intentioned or well integrated the researcher. You make the private public and leave the locals to take the consequences.”⁹⁰ Daisy Sewid-Smith certainly felt betrayed by Wolcott in particular and by “academic adjuncts” in general, but her sense of betrayal, and the written consequences of that betrayal, did contribute to making the case “more timely, more in tune with the reality of everyday life.”⁹¹ Although the controversy Wolcott set in motion in “Peripheral Participation” may have expanded and made more timely (even if only momentarily) discussion on the meaning of the contemporary potlatch and how to represent it, his methodology also sets his research subjects apart from the representations he makes of them.⁹² However, given the nature of the Northwest Coast potlatch, in which what people “say” about it later – concerning the affirmations of rank, privilege, rights, and prestige – may be just as important as (and, indeed, is part of) the event itself, such a separation of representation and subject matter cannot, in this case, be justified. It is therefore unfortunate that the editor of the *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* claimed that what was important about the Wolcott-Sewid potlatch controversy had to do not with the potlatch itself but, rather, with ethical issues regarding representations of Native peoples. Yet, how non-Native people understand the potlatch has consequences for how Aboriginal rights are understood today. And questions about anthropological practice and Native history are, for better or worse, closely intertwined.

⁸⁹ Schreiber and Newell, “Why Spend a Lot of Time Dwelling on the Past?”

⁹⁰ This occurred in the exposé of his sexual relationship with, and case study of, the “Sneaky Kid.” See Harry F. Wolcott, *Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath: Ethics and Intimacy in Fieldwork* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 145.

⁹¹ Wolcott, *Sneaky Kid*, 155.

⁹² Wolcott “tended to think of Brad [the ‘sneaky kid’] and Brad’s story as two separate events.” See Wolcott, *Sneaky Kid*, 46.