

## **Defining People Differently: Claiming Space for Aboriginal Diversities In Contemporary Canada**

Heather Norris Nicholson  
Centre for Canadian Studies  
Birkbeck College

### **Abstract**

This essay discusses some of the discursive practices associated with aspects of political, socio-economic and cultural relations between Canada's First Nations and the larger society over the past decade. Attention is drawn to discourses of reconciliation and healing, life-skills and survival economics and cultural revival prevalent during the 1990s, both in and away from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Section Two identifies the key themes that run through this multi-disciplinary collection of writings by Aboriginal and also non-Aboriginal writers based in and outside Canada. Recurring links between aspects of changing policies, languages and identities are identified. Drawing upon perspectives from linguistics, law, sociology and popular culture, Section Two highlights elements of continuity and change within contemporary Aboriginal experience, namely the emergence of Aboriginal rock music, demographic shift and urbanising lifestyles, language practice and policy, culturally appropriate curriculum design and the use of official terminology used in relation to Canada's indigenous peoples.

### **Introduction**

This volume reflects some of the ideas of those committed to engaging with the diverse and multi-faceted nature of contemporary Aboriginal experience in Canada. A shared recognition of the challenges posed by co-existing continuities and changes links these disparate voices as they speak out on different aspects of practices, policies and perspectives that affect indigenous people. The varied themes testify to the breadth and the spirit of work undertaken in and outside Canada by researchers who seek to make sense of the divergences and disparities between and within indigenous experience.

The continuing expansion of writing on Aboriginal-related aspects of Canadian Studies acknowledges the complex and dynamic relationship between indigenous and wider sections of society. This growing international body of work reflects and contributes to increasing awareness yet it remains something

of a minefield in which authors and editors strive to avoid the pitfalls of omission, generalisation and misrepresentation. Appropriation, as the Aboriginal filmmaker Loretta Todd reminds us, and in whatever form it takes, denies the pluralities of indigenous discourses. These writings attest to the positive value of collaboration as well as the creative possibilities released by juxtaposing research with such differing scales, perspectives and methodologies. The writers explore issues of identity, cultural expression and socio-political relations that expose both past legacies and new directions for Canada's First Nations. Finding ways to 'bridge the gap between peoples of different nations and different traditions using the building blocks of understanding, empathy and respect' involves creating spaces for dialogue and hearing each other's voices (RCAP, 1996, 4:6). Putting this collection on-line offers another space in which such dialogues may occur.

Aspects of communication (including this publishing project's own relationship to changing communication technologies) and the relationship of language to experience—in spoken, written and sung form—variously link the papers in this volume. This introductory essay identifies some of the continuities and changing realities of the 1990s and refers to some of their associated ideas, images and discursive practices. Since the cultural coding of language shapes meanings, interactions and representations, discourses both influence and are affected by terms used in the everyday world. This foray into meanings acknowledges the inherently political and historically constituted nature and the influence of officially sanctioned terminologies. It is a reminder of the varied and changing discourses in circulation in relation to Aboriginal issues and how understandings are constructed in specific ways.

Three discourses, first, those of healing and reconciliation, second, the language of enterprise and life-skills and, third the discourse of cultural restitution and its links to wider issues of autonomy are singled out as they link with the subsequent overview of the volume's themes. Each is briefly considered primarily in relation to the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) although some wider references are included. The report's publication in 1996 offers a useful mid point for the decade in the light of the scale and duration of data gathering and the slow nature of response. Its consultative basis also ensures a breadth of opinion that, if not comprehensive, at least acknowledges many of the diversities of contemporary Aboriginal experience. Although the ideas found within the RCAP circulate elsewhere, it would be misleading to suggest that they are anything more than a sample of thinking and talking about Aboriginal issues, used variously by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal commentators for specific purposes. The importance of other

distinct but often inter-connected discourses, including those of spirituality or land claims and Aboriginal rights, and also those considered in later essays, has been significant through the past decade.

## **1 From Conflict to Reconciliation and Healing**

Through the 1990s, Aboriginal issues and perspectives gained prominence in the national political agenda and the media although the extent, duration and effects of greater public exposure varied. The frequently confrontational settings polarised opinions and subsequent commentary among both indigenous and non-indigenous circles: media attention could be detrimental as well as useful in drawing attention to the inequalities that existed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sections of the population. Repeatedly through the decade, the challenges, needs and aspirations of Canada's First Nations impacted more broadly upon national political, socio-economic and cultural life.

Public complacency about contemporary Aboriginal experience was rocked by the events at Oka in 1990 and the higher than usual profile accorded to Aboriginal concerns in subsequent news reporting. Unprecedented levels of publicity and consultation culminated with the lengthy conclusions and recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples almost six years later. For varied reasons from national to local and individual level, public attention focused repeatedly upon aspects of First Nations' engagement with constitutional and environmental debates, the referendum on Quebec's sovereignty and the increasingly litigious pursuit of land claims, treaty rights and other issues of self-determination. The inauguration of Nunavut—after decades of negotiation—may be viewed as another way-maker in the shift of Aboriginal concerns towards centre-stage during the last decade.

The political discussion of such events and associated policy changes denotes shifts in discursive practice from confrontational to more conciliatory tones. Early in the decade, much writing attested to, despite important signs of progress, the persistent nature of low public awareness, misconceptions and ignorance of Canada's First Nations among the larger society. Commentaries offered by York (1990) and Miller (1991) among others, responded to the urgent need to present informed overviews of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations and variously made references to guilt, regret and demands for justice. The academic highlighting of past failures, broken promises and the disastrous consequences of coercive assimilation was an important corrective to the long denial of shortcomings in public policy, the low level of popular understanding and the negative imagery presented by media coverage of Aboriginal po-

litical activity. Government responses to the calls for public acknowledgement of past wrongs were also a vindication of the increasingly trenchant calls for justice and reappraisal made by commentators from both within and beyond Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal circles over the two previous decades (see, for instance, Adams (1975), Berger (1977), Asch (1984) and Frideres (1988).

The published findings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) denoted a further shift toward the official use of a reconciliatory tone. Notwithstanding the delays in publication, the unwieldy nature of the data and the difficulties of gaining access to the commission's findings, the consultative basis for the report allowed a new plurality of voices to comment upon Aboriginal experience. The work of the commission was also a powerful expression of the need by Ottawa for admission of past mistakes, atonement and the wish to find new ways of accommodating the diversities of indigenous experience within Canadian society. The litany of failed obligations and missed opportunities that underpins the detailed historical sections and extensive testimonies endorses the commissioners' call 'to move beyond policies that are the failed relics of colonialism' (1996, 5:93). Despite the signs, within specific contexts, of greater political visibility, economic dynamism and cultural resurgence, the commissioners drew attention to the persistence of a 'veil of indifference' within the general population (RCAP, 1996, 5:93). They pointed to a 'vacuum of consciousness' rooted in a 'pervasive lack of knowledge and even lack of interest' in Aboriginal issues among Canadians as a whole (1996, Vol 5:92).

Such comments were an unwelcome echo of findings from a survey, a decade earlier, by the sociologist, Rick Ponting. His conclusions had suggested that the Aboriginal population were 'a comparatively unknown people' to most Canadians and, in an allusion to McLellan's (1945) evocation of divisions in Canadian society, likened the gulf in intercultural relations to 'a modern day two solitudes' (cited in York, 1990:268). The Royal Commission's portrayal of widespread injustice, inequality and alienation between indigenous and other members of society reinforced the problems exposed by earlier studies. The commissioners were unequivocal: 'there cannot be peace or harmony unless there is justice' (RCAP, 1996a:ix). Such home truths sat uncomfortably alongside that emblem of Canadian cultural aspiration and political self-promotion, the peaceable kingdom (Kokotailo, 1998:3).

The RCAP's official recognition of the need to rebuild relationships gained further endorsement in January 1998 when the federal government publicly apologised for its past treatment of Canada's indigenous population (DIAND, 1998). The *Statement of Reconciliation* in 'formally acknowledging and re-

greeting historical injustices experienced by Aboriginal people' set out four priorities: a more co-ordinated approach to dealing with issues facing indigenous people in urban areas; a public education campaign to promote informed understanding of Aboriginal people within the wider society; an Aboriginal languages programme and community-based healing to address the damaging effects of the Residential School system. Aspects of all four issues are developed later in this volume.

Although the government's reconciliatory tone was a necessary precursor for action, another discourse, that of healing also permeated the findings and subsequent debates. The process of healing, of building physically, mentally and spiritually healthy lives and communities was a powerful metaphor and offered a strong rallying call for remedial response. Healing was an all-embracing and flexible term that could be applied to the rebuilding process at an individual and community level. By taking part in programmes to promote healing, community members as individuals and collectively could move beyond blame and channel anger, frustration or denial into constructive action (Duquette, undated). Healing thus acknowledged the dynamics of change as a prerequisite for positive response to the commission's findings, allowed for situational analysis and self-knowledge whilst avoiding negative stereotypes and the retrogressive labelling of social pathology and dysfunction (Elias, 1991:161).

The rhetoric of healing past wounds was already familiar in indigenous discourses through therapies and counselling that had developed as part of practical responses to such issues as alcoholism, substance abuse, physical violence and sexual abuse and AIDS. The symbolism of healing transferred readily into the new context of rebuilding damaged relations within, between and beyond Aboriginal communities. Its holistic vision of both individual and collective needs, offered an assurance that there would be a place for Elders and traditional values, institutions and beliefs, as well as for meeting the complex needs of Aboriginal youth. All generations should contribute to the huge task of strengthening communities' capacities to face the future. 'Capacity-building' and 'community-based healing' still featured prominently in *Gathering Strength. Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan* (1998), the federal response to the RCAP (DIAND, 1998:2) By mid decade, the imagery of healing was also compatible with new levels of openness and disclosure that were found in Aboriginal circles and the larger society.

## **2 Life-skills, Enterprise and the Language of Survival Economics**

Concepts of skill building also circulated in government and Aboriginal discussions of indigenous issues through the 1990s. Programmes for capacity building at local level flourished as unproblematic notions of unified and homogenous communities continued in government and indigenous circles. Community was a convenient focus for local planning and seemed to offer a bounded and definable entity separate from adjacent populations. Community action planning did not specifically address Aboriginal audiences but became an appropriate planning tool for many First Nations, particularly in parts of western Canada (Norris Nicholson, 1993, forthcoming).

The language of life-skills disseminated under the guise of various government initiatives aimed at fostering community-based development. Proposals for education and training acquired very specific goals: to develop skills—financial, management, presentation, business planning, decision-making and even communication!—which would foster greater economic self-sufficiency and self-government (CANDO, 1993:25– 26). The functional focus of educational and training programmes relates in part to the prevailing context of treaty negotiations. Inadvertently, perhaps, the competing demands upon teaching and learning detracted from concomitant attempts to develop culturally appropriate programmes and sometimes helped to displace both language and traditional knowledge into marginal subject slots, as explored later in this volume by Sachdev and Hanlon and also by Samson.

Empowerment, enhanced self-worth and a sense of identity were important components of personal skill building and the development of more cohesive communities (Norris Nicholson, 1993). The discourse of life-skills training, as with healing, offered scope for positive action and reflection on individual and shared needs. It became a means to talk about issues of self-confidence, motivation and low self-esteem. Developing self-reliance and self-management also transferred readily into programmes designed to foster teamwork and workplace skills. For development planners and political leaders such projects were vital in trying to move people into employment and thus help to break the destructive and familiar cycle of poverty and low-morale in and away from the reserves (Fontaine, 1994: 4– 9). Schemes to enhance employment skills soon embraced the even more basic need of creating work opportunities. Persistently high levels of unemployment meant that income generation represented more than salvaging self esteem: start up businesses were also stepping stones towards greater economic independence. An increasingly sophisticated

language of enterprise and survival economics began to reflect wider changes within the political economy of both the Aboriginal population and the larger society (Rheame, 1994:20– 21).

Canada's budgetary restrictions, revision of public policies and the expansion of the private sector through the 1990s reflected ideological shifts towards the centre-right. The reorientation of the Canadian business environment coincided with the expansion of Aboriginal communities into business-based development (Elias, 1991:67). At the start of the decade, the changing fiscal environment, prospects of cash compensation as part of claims and land settlement, plus ambitious schemes for new opportunities for income generation from new control over resources, fuelled concern about financial management, distribution and investment at community level. The problem of 'coping with the cash' (Robinson et al.) and 'making wise and fruitful use of what will likely be the largest pool of liquid capital ever made available to (Aboriginal People)' (Elias, 1991:82) prompted rapid expansion into business planning and management training schemes.

A combination of internally driven and external changes thus stimulated both the attempts to lessen economic dependency and discussion about how to generate wealth and greater self-sufficiency. The drive for economic empowerment required profound changes that would bring improved access to and control over land and resources, new approaches to raising revenues, capital investment and financial partnerships between public and private sectors. Modern technical, managerial and professional competencies were seen as pre-requisites for the economic independence that was central to the realisation of wider socio-political and cultural aspirations. The rapid growth of an infrastructure to service the mushrooming of Aboriginal business and enterprise both on and off reserves was both impressive and opportunistic.

This development of economic organisational structures, by an increasing confident entrepreneurial section of the indigenous population may be likened to the structures of urban governance discussed in this collection by Todd. Both networks have emerged within realms of formerly limited indigenous involvement and represent a challenge by increasingly independent professional and educated Aboriginal people to past structural constraints. Developments included new services for Aboriginal banking, marketing, trade and travel, as well as investment and management agencies and education and training organisations. Fairs, conventions and seminars as well as advisory or regulatory structures also flourished as part of modern indigenous economic activity.

Aboriginal business promotion rapidly adopted the language of enterprise. 'Identification, facilitation, evaluation and employment' were the goals of training programmes that sought to develop organisational skills, networking, business creativity and institutional structures that were appropriate to the delivery and promotion of modern Aboriginal economic activity (CANDO, 1994– 95:15). At federal level, encouragement came from Human Resources Canada, Industry Canada (Aboriginal Business Canada) and Indian and Northern Affairs. Supportive agencies also include the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers, the Native Investment and Trade Association, the Canadian Council for Aboriginal and Business Councils. Drawing upon a range of advisory organisations at national to local level, Aboriginal enterprise targeted Canadian business interests using the language of modern investment and commercial organisations.

Up-beat marketing and professionalism were stressed as the hallmarks of economic survival in a competitive environment. Advertising imagery and text sought to balance cultural distinctiveness and indicators of forward-looking business practice compatible with trends within both the national and the global economy (CANDO, 1994, 5:3). Traditionally respected cultural attributes as working together, trust and partnership were highlighted among the qualities that Aboriginal enterprise would bring to the modern business environment. Amidst the enthusiastic promotion came more cautionary words: speaking at the first Aboriginal/Corporate Economic Development Roundtable, the then National Chief Ovide Mercredi acknowledged the dichotomy posed by traditional lifestyle and culture and modern economic pressures facing most Aboriginal peoples. He urged for care in 'balancing traditional beliefs with the need for economic development in terms of contemporary reality, (Brascoupé, 1994:20). Maintaining cultural integrity, most commentators acknowledged amidst the zealous up-take of modern management strategies, was integral to the ultimate success of Aboriginal enterprise.

The findings of the RCAP also reiterated cultural dimensions within the discourse of indigenous business development. Strategies for change, the commissioners argued, must be rooted in an understanding of the underlying contributory historical processes, namely the economic provisions of the treaties and the need for Aboriginal people to manage their own economies, lands and resources that have supported indigenous economies in the past (Newhouse, 1997:21). The RCAP's recommendations testified to its commissioners' exposure to the contrasts between virtually non-existent and flourishing Aboriginal enterprise culture. Their proposals overtly fused the discourse of enterprise with pragmatism and an awareness of other goals (cultural maintenance, re-

claiming a sense of identity, combining aspects of tradition with modernity). Survival economics was about more than individual betterment; it was also an integral part of social development and self-determination. Without the intervention of Corporate Canada—the private business sector—however, the challenging of renewing relationships and building sustainable partnerships was unlikely to occur. On behalf of Aboriginal Peoples' economic futures, the RCAP called for a ten year programme of education and training; this was the necessary blood transfusion into indigenous economic planning that would bring real meaning to the rhetoric of new relationships.

### **3 The Languages of Restitution, Recovery and Cultural Autonomy**

Through the 1990s, Aboriginal cultural activity and expression, in tandem with other aspects of indigenous life, experienced significant expansion and diversification. The RCAP offers one window upon some of the circulating attitudes and the varied discourses on aspects of the place of cultural distinctiveness within First Nations' experience. Through its consultative process, the report referred to broad-ranging forms of cultural practice, including performance and visual arts, media, publishing, heritage management and language. The RCAP alludes to aspects of cultural activity within which practitioners hold diverse opinion about the significance of Aboriginal culture for and beyond the indigenous population. Within such a grouping, some perspectives are bound to differ considerably from the overview attempted by the commissioners. Such divergences are inevitable in any context where meaningful cultural practice persists independently of the state. This acknowledgement need not negate the attempt here to identify overarching patterns in the commissioners' response to issues of Aboriginal cultural inheritance.

The RCAP brought together much evidence that acknowledged the significance of Canada's diverse forms of Aboriginal cultural heritage and the indivisibility of cultural activity from other aspects of Aboriginal self-realisation. Cultural expression at a personal and a collective level was identified in the report as one among many inter-connected processes of self-determination. Cultural dimensions permeated the discussion of land claims and self-government, social, spiritual and physical well-being, economic betterment and the detailed consideration of inter-generation relations and the needs of Aboriginal youth and Elders. Testimonies gathered by the commission affirmed how cultural vitality strengthened identities and helped to bridge aspects of tradition and modernity within the evolving nature of contemporary Aboriginal life.

The report highlighted the role of cultural activity in countering the destructive effects of misrepresentation, misappropriation and stereotyping. The freedom to cultural expression was equated with cultural survival and societal enrichment. The benefit brought to the whole of society by cultural restitution was made explicit in Chapter 6 of *Gathering Strength*, the third volume of the RCAP: this survey 'not only defines distinct Aboriginal cultures but contributes greatly to the cultural definition and identity of Canada' (RCAP, 1996, 3:642). Indigenous languages, cultural knowledge and different forms of oral, material and visual heritage, old and new communication systems ranging from traditional music to contemporary media and performance were considered to be vital to the overall dynamism and sustainability of Canada's Aboriginal population.

Issues of cultural retention and cultural recovery recur through the pages of the report. Its recommendations warned of specific threats, identified in relation to Aboriginal material culture, namely the lack of access to and protection for sacred and historical sites, cultural artefacts and regalia. Both had profound implications for institutional policy, curatorial practice and public awareness. Likewise, the discussion of Aboriginal language maintenance, shift and retention pointed to the reductive impact of language loss upon indigenous cultures, identities and knowledge systems. The commissioners highlighted the widespread need for intervention to alleviate the continuing erosion of Aboriginal languages. Their acknowledgement of some success stories drawn from widely different Aboriginal contexts offered encouragement amidst the bleak vision of continuing threats to distinctive aspects of Aboriginal culture. The severity of language loss was also highlighted elsewhere in the report's discussion of Aboriginal Elders and youth, education and urban issues. Aspects of how language and lifeways survive in modern contexts are developed in this volume in articles by Sachdev and Hanlon, and by Samson.

The findings of the RCAP identified obstacles that blocked the sharing of Aboriginal distinctiveness with sections of the larger society. The report made frequent allusions to both past and current processes that undermined cultural integrity and emphasised the challenge of cultural stress. The report's retrospective gaze made explicit the cumulative and destructive impact of past assimilation policies upon aspects of cultural expression and practice. Cultural loss or denial only furthered societal impoverishment as well as individual disorientation and alienation. Overcoming aspects of cultural denial that derived from destructive colonial policies of the past was seen by the commissioners as being vital for the evolving nature of Aboriginal society within modern Canada. The disastrous consequences of deliberate severance

from indigenous languages and forms of knowledge, beliefs, values systems, institutions and the freedom to follow other aspects of tradition lifestyles, were related to a downward spiral into alienation, marginalisation and internalised anger against poor self-image. As with other aspects of the commission's findings, this bleak appraisal could only reaffirm rather than revise informed understanding. It drew attention, however, to both the erosive effects of cultural loss upon modern indigenous existence as well as highlighting the intricate connections with many of the other challenges that faced Aboriginal people in and away from urban areas.

Although the RCAP did not stress links between enhanced political visibility and cultural resurgence, its findings and recommendations made a strong connection between cultural vitality and the future well-being of Canada's Aboriginal peoples. The commissioners highlighted the role of Aboriginal languages, cultures, heritages and knowledge systems within the overall task of bringing about social, economic, material and spiritual renewal of Aboriginal peoples. This endorsement of a firm cultural base underpinned the RCAP's vision of a more participatory, liberal democracy (RCAP, 3: 586). Neither the recommendations nor the general tone of the report attained the ideological thrust of many contemporary cultural commentators. The RCAP did not venture to assert artistic expression as an outlet of politicised consciousness. It contented itself with a more liberal championing of cultural revitalisation, and expression and autonomy in a contemporary context (1996, 3:586).

The commissioners viewed cultural issues as fundamental in the overall task of renewing intercultural relations (1996, 3:585). The RCAP espoused cultural pluralism as a basis for achieving the goals of recognition, sharing, respect and mutual understanding. It was an evocation of the importance of cultural restitution, recovery and re-discovery that seemed to derive inspiration from awareness of the rather better co-ordinated and often long-established federal programmes that existed to promote ethnic diversity. The comments in this collection by Voyageur and Calliou on Canada's stance on multiculturalism link neatly with the RCAP's wish for greater inclusivity. Bringing about the necessary shift in attitudes seemed to be inspired by a vision of reforming public education.

The RCAP called for a review of mechanisms that purported to support Aboriginal cultural activity. Many issues were neither unique to Aboriginal nor Canadian contexts but indicative of wider problems in devising responsive, flexible and inclusive forms of arts and culture administration. The need to overhaul and integrate a wide range of existing public policy on Aboriginal

cultural issues was long overdue. There was pragmatic recognition of how modern administrative practice and commercial considerations could seriously affect Aboriginal media, writing, performance and the visual arts. Although the RCAP's coverage of cultural expression was patchy, its findings exposed neglect and criticised ill-formed policies.

The RCAP's message was forthright: freedom of Aboriginal expression and cultural practice denied opportunities and was even constrained by the meagre structures supposedly put in place to help. Funding strategies, sponsorship, exhibitions, commissions, marketing and distribution agencies were influential in constructing public notions about Aboriginal artistic output. So too were government policies in areas of heritage, culture and artistic promotion, education and training. Whether directed to Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal artists, such policies may be persuasive as their influences contribute to the processes that shape, define and legitimise what is included or excluded from the public gaze and popular view of creative work and cultural expression. The hallmarks of acceptability in turn may affect what does/does not enter the marketable mould of distinctive cultural artefacts for domestic and international consumption.

The concerns about sustaining cultural revitalisation in a supportive context were balanced by a regard for safeguarding cultural autonomy and artistic integrity. Any forms of intervention by governments, institutions and cultural agencies should remain at arm's length (1996, 3:641) The commissioners advised that the task of finding an effective balance between enabling support and cultural freedom should continue for at least a generation. At the risk of appearing over-cautious in their appraisal of need and public commitment, the commissioners sought to address the issue of artistic independence. The report positions cultural empowerment firmly in relation to appropriation and denial of Aboriginal authority and control. Perhaps it was a response to recognition of how over-exposure may also pose a threat to the integrity of Aboriginal cultural heritage. As shown by the phenomenal growth of Aboriginal tourism and the heritage-based industries, indigenous creativity and artistic autonomy could also be compromised through being packaged within the recognisable languages of the late twentieth century's cultural industries, media and marketing. Arguably, adequate support mechanisms offered in appropriate ways help to reduce the dependency upon the market place.

The RCAP's endorsement of cultural autonomy has broader ramifications about the nature and meaning of Aboriginal artistic and cultural practice. Clearly, promotional, institutional and critical attempts to classify artists in

particular ways is nothing new. Imposed labels have long tried to infer commonality of purpose, yet Aboriginal artists—broadly defined across all media—occupy hugely different positions. Their messages are inherently varied even though aspects of shared tradition, culture, experience, belief and values may inform practice. Artists differ in how they work within or seek to challenge established perceptions and stereotypes. They differ as they explore how to communicate, revive and preserve traditional cultural knowledge and express contemporary issues pertinent to Aboriginal peoples. A shared commitment to artistic expression as a statement of cultural identity, affiliation or ideological outlook may prompt resonances found in the work of other Aboriginal artists but global flows of culture mean that such creative linkages may criss-cross through time and space connecting diverse peoples, places and perspectives. Such processes inevitably affect the visions and versions of real and imagined worlds they choose to share.

To speak, therefore, of any groups of Aboriginal artists, be they carvers, painters, filmmakers, broadcasters, writers, performers, musicians, story tellers and so on, as a single homogenous unit is misleading. Labelling even as ‘Aboriginal arts and artists’ (1996, 3: 642), like other attempts to classify indigenous artistry, may simplify and isolate an individual’s creative output from other contexts. Labels tend to fix identities and overlook the dynamics of change and creativity. The output of artists of Aboriginal origin working in different media has continued to gain prominence and recognition through the past decade as evidenced by the prodigious growth in visual and electronic media, including the launch of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network in 1999. Whilst the RCAP’s endorsement of recent cultural resurgence was to be welcomed, it offered a curiously muted range of Aboriginal voices. A more representative and perhaps realistic engagement with indigenous cultural discourses would be more inclusive of issues relating to cultural tenacity, cultural critique and perception, multi nuanced identities and the on-going process of negotiating between past, present and future times. But such is the nature of discursive practice—the talk goes on.

This exploration of some of the images, ideas and associations embedded within three discourses found within the RCAP has tried to highlight how themes and issues may be cast and re-cast in particular ways that relate to wider influences and to particular socio-historical and political moments. Once selected, however, terms of reference seem to acquire a life of their own, as they continue to affect meanings that remain in circulation and, over time, their origins slip into obscurity. Likewise, the Royal Commission, now nearly five years on since publication, seems in danger of neglect. Its recommendations

along with its massive fact finding have been viewed by some commentators more as an exercise in gathering dust than a gathering of strength for affirmative action and response (Todd, in Todd and Thornton, forthcoming:2).

Yet, for all the delays in its publication, its cautious tone, its omissions and its lengthy list of recommendations about issues that still remain unresolved, the RCAP was and remains significant within the context of understanding recent writings, representations and exchanges in relation to Aboriginal peoples. Setting up the commission emerged from a specific and highly charged stage in Canada's relations with its indigenous peoples. Its somewhat mixed and decidedly muted reception in late 1996 should not negate the importance of the issues raised within its pages. Neither should the time lag diminish the continuing importance of many of those issues. Unsurprisingly, the RCAP has provided a point of reference for the research developed in the subsequent pages of this volume. It is to those writings that attention now turns.

The opening essay in this volume situates the negotiation of contemporary indigenous identities, through the development of Aboriginal rock music, firmly within the realm of culture and politics. Nick Baxter-Moore's title 'Making a noise', signals a reclaiming of musical space. His research testifies to a rolling back of the *silence* that is taking place as Aboriginal musicians engage with the processes of political, cultural and promotional dominance that have prevented their voices from being widely heard until the past two decades.

If making noise denotes an artistic response to the colonial suppression of indigenous musical expression, it also encodes the increasing confidence among Aboriginal artists as they speak or sing out. Reclaiming of space is more than just establishing a presence under the musical spotlight. As Baxter-Moore indicates, the emergence of a distinctive indigenous musical form—Aboriginal rock—also involves musical encounters with the traditions of dominant cultural forms: elements of indigenous music and culture thus blend with conventions of modern rock and popular music to produce a 'musical syncretism'. Musical synthesis extends further than the experimental fusion of distinctive traditional instrumentation and modern synthesised effects now familiar to listeners of World Beat or World Music. Lyrics or cover notes in Aboriginal languages challenge the dominance of English or French and subject matter evokes diverse past and present socio-political and cultural concerns. Imagery associated with genocide, oppression, persecution, displacement and the clash of tradition and modern values redefines rock music's subject matter while more familiar themes—relationships, growing up, identities, loneliness, dis-

placement—within rock, country or pop genres are infused with Aboriginal cultural significance.

The emergence of Aboriginal rock relates to broader processes of change affecting both the indigenous and wider society. Many artists are young and share the experience of urban living. Not only does this equate with two important demographic shifts of the past decade as discussed in the following article by Roy Todd. The urbanisation of Aboriginal peoples increases contact with the wider population which through making possible more varied forms of intercultural encounter, should help to overcome prejudices. Exposure to the urban music scene also assists with dissemination and inevitably contributes to furthering processes of synthesis and intercultural negotiation. Mobility, urbanising lifestyles and media technologies and communication systems impact in both positive and negative ways on all aspects of Aboriginal life and cultural activity. Such is the pervasive nature of global cultural linkages and an internationalised entertainment industry, that similar issues affect indigenous musicians elsewhere (Cohen, 1996:2; Schech and Haggis, 2000). The emergence of Aboriginal rock thus links with wider discourses of political engagement through indigenous musical expression. If, as suggested elsewhere (Neuenfeldt, 1996:17), indigenous music helps to mediate encounters with dominant cultures, are a vehicle for identity-narratives and function variously as entertainment, education and empowerment, then Baxter-Moore offers a valuable contribution to charting the evolution of those sounds.

Roy Todd's paper examines other implications of recent socio-demographic, economic and cultural changes. Successive surveys (Statistics Canada, 1991 in RCAP, 4: 601; RCAP, 1993:11, RCAP, 1996a:5,106,117ff) have highlighted important social and economic shifts within the indigenous population and, in particular, the changing realities of urban Aboriginal experience. The residential shift from reserves and rural areas into larger urban centres where almost half of Canada's indigenous peoples already now live is also expected to grow by almost 43% reaching almost 457,000 by 2016 (cf. 320,000 in 1996, RCAP,1996a: 117). Such findings offer strong foundations for assessing the efficacy of policy-making and infra-structural provision. This demographic shift is the starting point for Todd's analysis.

Todd identifies that symbolic meanings appear to be increasingly at odds with indigenous realities as increasing numbers of Aboriginal people move into urban areas. He suggests that there is a marked contrast between discourses about the land and cities, with the land commonly represented as a source of life while urban areas are typified as sources of social problems. The long-

recognised centrality of land to Aboriginal discourse is an evocation of ancient ancestral links with resource-rich natural environment where Aboriginal people 'belong' (RCAP, 1996a: 116). It is set against the perception of the *urban environment* as problematic Aboriginal living space, commonly linked with disadvantage, deprivation and destitution.

Todd highlights the drawbacks of such discourses and reminds us of their omissions. 'They also carry silences. They maintain sharp divisions between the land and urban areas, between nature and people and between Aboriginal and White cultures. The emphasis upon the land tends to maintain a silence on the agency of Aboriginal people...' Such language is unhelpful given the demographic redistribution of Aboriginal people. Furthermore, it does not reflect the new forms of social organisation, networking and partnerships that play increasingly important roles in Aboriginal lives in urban areas. Nor do such oppositional terms accurately reflect the complex links between people in urban and rural areas. Todd points to an expanding and increasingly stable core of activities that strengthen personal and collective relations with the wider society. Such processes foster integration and contrast with a bleaker view offered by Boldt who foresaw Aboriginal adaptation to urban living would require their being 'forced to choose between cultural assimilation or to continue living in the culture of dependence' (1993:192).

Todd's work points to the emergence of social capital, economic mobility and increased social differentiation within the Aboriginal urban population. Integration through educational, professional, social, cultural and economic networks enables greater forms of participation within political and organisational aspects of urban living. The development of this social citizenship finds expression, Todd argues, in organisational activity, collective mobilisation of resources and the increased ability to bring about change. Such transformative activity tends to occur in gaps in provision or vacuums in existing systems of jurisdiction, governance and representation. Todd illustrates this process by discussing how a range of services, within the city of Vancouver, now address aspects of Aboriginal health and social welfare. Aboriginal involvement in the provision, policy-making and delivery of services attests to the extent of participation and responsibilities in urban governance. Such Aboriginal involvement in urban organisation, governance and representation prompts Todd to view these changes as urban based forms of social sovereignty that could have wider implications as Aboriginal peoples everywhere seek to assume control over their own lives and futures.

Another area of Aboriginal experience where recent research shows encouraging signs of positive development is in the field of Aboriginal language retention and recovery as discussed by Itesh Sachdev and David Hanlon. Loss of the right to speak Aboriginal languages is widely acknowledged as a key determinant of the breakdown in the transmission of cultural knowledge, values and beliefs from one generation to another (see for example, Friesen, 1991: 153; RCAP, 1996a:91; RCAP,1996, 3:602; RCAP, 1996, 4:524,529). The dramatic and recent decline in language use and retention has prompted, since the late 1960s, a reversal in government policies of overt suppression to the development of programmes designed to revitalise Aboriginal languages. Although policy reversals have had some positive impact upon language protection and revival, progress remains limited and Aboriginal languages continue to lack status and significance in most curriculum programmes which are now increasingly the dominant channel of Aboriginal language acquisition.

The present research by Sachdev and Hanlon focuses upon attitudes, perceptions, contact patterns and ethnolinguistic identification among teenage and adult speakers in two different communities, the Cree of Fisher River in central Manitoba and the more geographically dispersed speakers of Haida in Haida Gwaii, British Columbia. Data was collected on speakers' proficiency, attitudes and the perceived status of their Aboriginal language. Another dimension—the 'vitality' of language use within formation of social groups and among people as part of 'in-group' identity—was gathered to test the influence of social psychological processes upon patterns of language retention and survival. The two study groups were from communities with relatively small and isolated populations. Colonising processes had imposed English so Elders were now the main fluent speakers of the Aboriginal languages. In both contexts, earlier policies to suppress the use of Aboriginal language had been replaced by programmes that were designed to reclaim their linguistic heritage as part of wider goals for cultural revitalisation.

Although the authors identify a number of constraints upon the efficacy of the language programmes to revive Cree and Haida, their findings offer some scope for cautious optimism. Both study groups showed a strong relationship between language and cultural identity, a point that concurs with Baxter-Moore's reference to the language of rock lyrics in the development of Aboriginal rock. . Being a member of the Aboriginal in-group had positive connotations: the data revealed positive social identification, attitudes and a high level of perceived vitality of language use. Participants indicated that their Aboriginal language was more important than English to in-group identity and that there was a need to give greater support to language use and re-

tention within the social structures and institutions within either locality. Such findings are important steps towards the restoration of linguistic heritage. As the RCAP (1996a:92) points out, 'a language will not live if it is not used in everyday life.'

Sachdev and Hanlon were less optimistic about the role of formal school programmes in language revitalisation even though in both communities, school-based initiatives were generally favoured and perceived as potentially effective tools of language recovery. Although the RCAP includes school as an important setting, it emphasises that for a language to be a medium of communication its use in the home and family is particularly important. The links between Aboriginal language use, identity and social context, found among these speakers of Cree and Haida offer positive signals for language revival in these communities and merit comparative exploration in contrasting rural, urban and other social settings.

Loss of language was only one of the devastating consequences of assimilation policies imposed upon Aboriginal peoples through the school system. The brutal legacies of that era impact successively upon generations as once institutionalised children now often find themselves unable to provide the stability and nurture within a family setting for another generation. The consequences of inappropriate school regimes, abusive teaching styles and policies designed to obliterate pupils' sense of cultural identity are increasing well known across many parts of Canada. *The Statement of Reconciliation*, made by Jane Stewart, Minister of State for Indian Affairs and Northern Development in January 1998 formally acknowledged the Residential School system and its 'legacies of personal pain and distress that continue to reverberate in Aboriginal communities to this day'. The federal government also committed itself to working in partnership 'on a healing strategy to assist individuals and communities in dealing with the consequences...' Colin Samson's work with the Innu since 1994, adds another twist to the succession of educational policies that have been devised for indigenous people. He examines the history and experiences of imposed education in two Innu Labrador communities, Sheshatshiu and Utshimassits or Davis Inlet. Through interviews, he establishes a dismal record of educational provision, abusive power relations and betrayal of children's trust in the pillars of their colonised world—school, church and adults that, at times, even included their own parents.

Visible efforts to redesign teaching and learning opportunities in culturally appropriate ways have been introduced in both settlements in recent years. Samson details and evaluates these 'correctives to past insensitivities' through

school-based observation, and interviews over the past five years. He uncovers evidence to suggest that widespread disquiet persists about the appropriateness of educational provision available to Innu children. Parental concern highlights unease about the absence of specific Innu content from the curriculum and wider fears that school continues to a tool of cultural assimilation. Such concerns may, in part, disclose an older generation's underlying distrust of a formal education that imposed alien values, histories and knowledge systems without relevance to either themselves or the disorientated youths who have died in their communities within the past decade.

Such responses would be understandable but Samson's findings also disclose that curriculum innovations also cause concern. The introduction of culture days that purport to reconnect Innu pupils with their cultural heritage represent a clear shift in policy and curriculum design but become, in Samson's views, new forms of cultural appropriation, parody and simulation. Well-meant but ill-conceived plans by outsiders to help young people to reconnect with their cultural inheritance, as suggested by Samson's study, distance young people still further from their cultural roots. The dynamics of indigenous cultures have always involved elements of adaptation and exchange. But the pressures caused by externally led substitutions and newer inventions of tradition require that we must reconsider how modern processes of cultural change pose challenges for our understanding of traditions and diverse identities. Constant reappraisal of the role of formal education and modern communication technologies is needed in contemporary modernisation processes. Samson's paper also attests to the continuing need for more Aboriginal educators in the planning, design and delivery of all aspects of curriculum provision. Since indigenous communities gained the right to control their own educational programmes, much progress has been made at all levels but the need for appropriate curriculum content, teaching and learning styles and qualified Aboriginal educators requires a priority for Canada's First Nations.

A recurring theme through the collection has been the acknowledgement of diversities within contemporary Aboriginal experience. Equally important is the recognition that Canada's indigenous peoples have always been characterised by great diversity. The denial of that complex heterogeneity may be linked to the reductive perceptions of colonising processes that, as in other contexts, simplified the indigenous presence into a largely undifferentiated Other. Erasure of identity was an expression of power. The re-labelling of people, like places, was an administrative means to redefine lines of control. The classificatory systems introduced through law, administration and colonial epistemologies reinforced patterns of colonial authority. Their new nomen-

clature helped to replace and efface earlier identities. Recent years have seen Aboriginal groups assert alternative names and orthographies that gain ever wider recognition and use.

The concluding paper by Cora Voyageur and Brian Calliou offers a salutary reminder about the enduring influence of labels that affect many aspects of Aboriginal experience and their relations with the wider society. It is fitting to include work that engages with the profusion of legal, administrative and academic definitions that still impact upon Canada's First Nations. Not only do these terms simplify but they also legitimise patterns of differentiation that have had divisive effects within and between sections of the indigenous population. Such terminologies and their associated discursive practices tend to distort public perception of Canada's indigenous population. Voyageur and Calliou juxtapose the limitations of a historically rooted myopic failure to see the 'various shades of red', with Canada's official encouragement of diverse ethnicities among its newer populations. They highlight how the continuing need for increasing public awareness remains a priority at the start of a new century. That's a task for us all, writers and readers alike! Please read on!

## References

- Adams H. 1995 *A Tortured People. The Politics of Colonisation*. Penticton, BC., Theytus Books.
- Adams, H. 1975 *Prison of Grass*. Saskatoon, Sask., Fifth House.
- Asch M. 1984 *Home and Native Land. Aboriginal Rights and the Canadian Constitution*. Toronto, Methuen.
- Berger, T. 1977 *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland*. Ottawa, Ministry of Supply and Services. (See also Berger, T. 1988 *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland*, Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre. Introduction to the revised edition.)
- Boldt, M. 1993 *Surviving as Indians. The Challenge of Self-Government*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Brascoupé, S. 1994 A Conversation with Chief Ovide Mecredi. *MawiO'mi Journal* 2: 4-9.
- Canada. Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (DIAND) 1998 *Gathering Strength. Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*. Available at <http://www.inac.gc.ca/news/jan98/1-9801.html> (Accessed on 12 Jan 1998).
- Canada. Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (DIAND) 1998 *Statement of Reconciliation*. Available at <http://www.inac.gc.ca/strength/declar.html> Accessed on 12 Jan 1998.

- Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. 1993 *Aboriginal Peoples in Urban Centres*. Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services.
- Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Vol 4. Perspectives and Realities*. Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services.
- Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Vol 2. Restructuring the Relationship*. Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services.
- Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Vol.5. Renewal: a Twenty Year Commitment*. Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services.
- Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. 1996a *People to People. Nation to Nation: Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services.
- Cohen, H. 1996 Media, Music Text: Indigenous Media of Australia and Canada. *Australian Canadian Studies 14, 1–2*: 1–11.
- Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers (CANDO), *Annual Report*. 1994–95, 15.
- Duquette, D.C. (undated) *Prerequisites for Future Possibilities: Some perspectives from Participants in the Conference on the Report by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Unpublished paper prepared in the School of Public Administration, University of Victoria (Personal communication with Professor Frank Cassidy, School of Public Administration, University of Victoria).
- Elias, P. 1991 *Development of Aboriginal Peoples' Communities*. North York, Ont., Captus Press.
- Fontaine, P. 1994 Grand Chief Fontaine: Building a New Government. *MawiO'mi Journal 2, 2*:5–9.
- Frideres, J. 1988 *Native People in Canada. Contemporary Conflicts*. Toronto, Prentice Hall.
- Friesen, J. 1991 *The Cultural Maze. Complex Questions on Native Destiny in Western Canada*. Calgary, Detsileg Enterprises.
- Kokotailo, P. 1998 Creating the Peaceable Kingdom: Edmund Hicks, Northrop Frye and Joe Clark in Howard, V. *Creating the Peaceful Kingdom and Other Essays on Canada*, East Lansing, Mich, Michigan State University Press.
- Miller, J.R. 1991 *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens. A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*, Toronto. University of Toronto Press.

- Neuenfeldt, K. 1996 Songs of Survival. Ethno-Pop Music as Ethnographic Indigenous Media, *Australian Canadian Studies* 14, 1–2:15–31.
- Newhouse, D. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Economic Development. *Aboriginal Times* 1997:21–24.
- Norris Nicholson, 1993 Cultural Tourism in Enterprising Times. *London Journal for Canadian Studies*, 8: 57–69.
- Norris Nicholson, H. Icons, Flagships and Identities: Aboriginal Tourism in British Columbia in Todd, R. and Thornton, M. eds. *Aboriginal Peoples and Other Canadians. Shaping New Relationships*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa/ ICCS (forthcoming).
- Ponting, J.R. ed 1986 *Arduous Journey: Canadian Indians and Decolonisation*. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart.
- Rheume, G. 1994 Employability Skills for the Canadian Workforce. *MawiO'mi Journal* 3: 20–21.
- Robinson, M. Dickerson, M and Van Camp, J, 1989 “Coping with the cash”: a Financial Review Of Four Northern Land Claims Settlements With A View To Maximising Economic Opportunities for the Next Generation of Claims Settlements in the North West Territories. Background Study Prepared For The North West Territories Legislative Assembly (cited in Elias, 1991:82).
- Schech, S. and Haggis, J. 2000 *Culture and Development. A Critical Introduction*. London, Blackwell.
- Thornton, M. and Todd, R. eds *Aboriginal People and Other Canadians: Shaping New Relationships*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa/ICCS (forthcoming).
- York, G. 1990 *The Dispossessed. Life and Death in Native Canada*. Toronto, Little Brown and Company Ltd.