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NOMINATED FOR FOUNDING PRESIDENTS AWARD

COAST SALISH TEXTILES: FROM STILLED FINGERS TO SPINNING AN IDENTITY

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*Much that had been theirs that was fine was destroyed and lost. Much that they were proud of still remains, but goes unnoticed by those who have not the eyes to see nor the desire to comprehend.*¹ ~ Oliver Wells, 1965

I feel free when I weave. ~ Frieda George, 2010

When aboriginal women of south western British Columbia, Canada undertook to revisit their once prolific and esteemed ancestral textile practices, the strand of cultural knowledge linking this heritage to contemporary life had become extremely tenuous. It is through an engagement with cultural memory, painstakingly reclaimed, that Coast Salish women began a revival in the 1960s. It included historically resonant weaving and basketry, as well as the more recent adaptive and expedient practice of knitting. The revival, particularly in the historically based craft of wool weaving, its current status in two First Nations communities and its meaning to individual women, is considered here.

Interdisciplinary tools and sources allow more history to be centered on women;² these include interviews, oral history, archival records and historical sources including textiles. Through these methods, employing a ‘decolonized’ approach that values aboriginal ‘ways of knowing’,³ we hear the voices of those currently engaged in this ancient practice and tease out details and nuances of the culture and individual identity of those women who came before them. That textiles are a means to communicate knowledge, history and identity can be shown to weave empowering connections for descendants to help ameliorate the marginalization of aboriginal women.

There is a larger marginalization to consider. Coast Salish, the indigenous peoples of the lower Fraser River in BC and northwestern Washington received little attention until the 1980s⁴ sidelined by early anthropological assumptions. The prevailing notions were that Coast Salish were a less advanced subculture of Northwest peoples with little of original culture left to be valued in regions where settlers created Seattle, Tacoma, Victoria and Vancouver.⁵ The focus below is on my neighbours, less often in the viewfinder, on the Canadian side of the divide. On both sides of the border Coast Salish experienced disastrous government policy, clearly a failure by 1930⁶, and decimation of culture that included the unraveling of women’s weaving, inextricable from their social fabric.

‘Stilled Fingers’

Musqueam (Muss-kwee-um) refers to an aboriginal people of approximately 1200 named for the sea grass that once covered their ancestral lands at the mouth of the Fraser River where the City of Vancouver has

¹ Oliver Wells, Introduction, *The Chilliwacks and Their Neighbors*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1987) 13.

² Veronica Strong Boag, “Writing About Women”, in *Writing About Canada : a handbook for modern Canadian history*. ed. J. A. Scultz. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada) 1990, 177.

³ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*. N.Y.: Zed Books. 1999, 1.

⁴ Wayne Suttles, The Recognition of Coast Salish Art. In *S'abadeb = The gifts : Pacific Coast Salish art and artists*, ed. Barbara Brotherton. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009, 50.

⁵ Bruce G. Miller, Introduction, *Be of Good Mind: Essays on the Coast Salish*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007, 3.

⁶ Barbara Brotherton, “How Did it All Get There? Tracing the Path of Salish Art Collections”. In *S'abadeb = The gifts : Pacific Coast Salish art and artists*, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009, 103.

engulfed all but 416 acres.⁷ *Musqueam* people experienced cultural loss from the time of European colonization in the late 1700s.

When women of *Musqueam* wanted to weave again in the 1980s all that remained of the once pivotal activity was a thread of memory. For help they turned in part to the *Stó:lō* (Staw-loh), another Coast Salish people located about 60 miles (100km) up the Fraser River Valley from Vancouver who were less disturbed by Europeans until the rush to gold fields beyond their valley in 1858. In terms of weaving, the *Stó:lō* had fared somewhat better; dormant weaving skills had been revitalized a decade or two earlier.

The state of a core cultural practice for these two Coast Salish peoples was indicative of all Pacific Northwest weaving in the mid-20th century, near eradication. For women, weaving in full context historically held inherent cultural significance that endowed their robes, blankets and regalia with enormous prestige and value. The sheer extent of production at its peak can be inferred from a festival gathering of several tribes on the banks of the Chilliwack River c.1858 where Chiefs gained stature redistributing wealth in the form of 300-400 blankets⁸ at the soon to be outlawed *potlatch*.

In addition to government policy, the once great need for blankets was effaced by the factory made variety, the goat hair used in their weaving became even scarcer and most importantly the cultural value placed on the once prolific blanket or robe making was undermined. As women were the weavers, it follows that most were occupied in the esteemed process to meet the intense demand for woven goods.

Women negotiated this change in circumstance by adapting their close historical relationship with textiles to keep some of the processes they knew alive. Knitting was, along with sewing and some basket making, taught by Europeans in schools where weaving, thought to be 'too native' was not.⁹ Before aboriginal knowledge was valued unequivocally it was Oliver Wells, writing poetically and poignantly in 1969 who summed up the state of his neighboring culture:

The coming of the white man in the gold rush, and the missionaries' determination that the native must discard his old customs and dress were the final blows which stilled the fingers of the native women. Their ancient craft of loom weaving was gradually forgotten by succeeding generations.¹⁰

This acculturation is apparent in the Coqualeetza (*Qw'oqw'elith'a*) Residential School (1884-1924) in Chilliwack where its teaching of textiles heralded immersion in a new culture. (Fig. 1) The activity of 'the fingers' was redirected to distinctly European textile methods. The photograph of the girls class near the turn of the century, visually illustrates the shaping of an altered culture where 'talking Indian' brought punishment¹¹. This reshaping of skills is evident in two handiwork samples of student work examined at the *Chilliwack Archives*, a pair of 'bloomers' and a nightgown. The fine cotton lace trimmed garments reveal fine sewing that displaces functional weaving that was imbued with significance.

Settler contact with its 'coercive and exclusive' acculturation¹² clearly accounts for the loss of a textile

⁷ Trouton, L. D. 'Know Who You Are and Where You Come From'. *KUNAPIPI: Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 2001, 23(2), 63.

⁸ Oliver Wells, *Salish weaving, primitive and modern, as practised by the Salish Indians of South West British Columbia*. Sardis, B.C.: 1969., p. 27.

⁹ Barbara Brotherton, "How Did it All Get There?" 116.

¹⁰ Oliver Wells, *Salish weaving*, 29.

¹¹ Jody, Woods, *I remind until I fall: an examination of space, memory and experience at the Coqualeetza Residential School and Indian hospital*. Unpublished Thesis. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1998, 6.

¹² Nancy Goldberger, Cultural Imperatives and Diversity in Ways of Knowing. in *Knowledge, difference, and power: essays inspired by Women's ways of knowing*. New York: Basic, 337.

skill inseparable from culture. *Stó:lō* writer, Lee Maracle, identifies the struggle for aboriginal women since “conquest” who need to “weave a new story. A story in which pain is not our way of life.”¹³

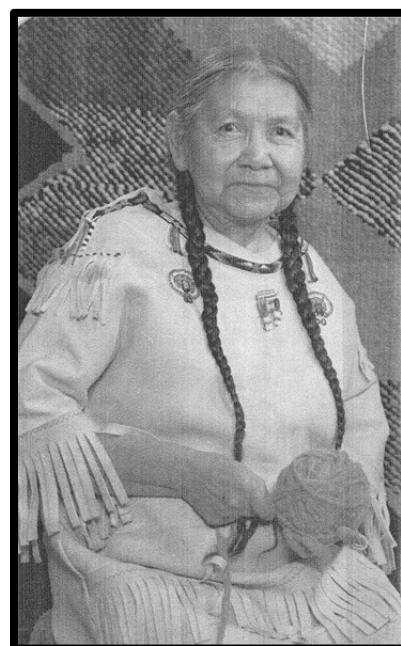


Figure 1, left. Girls class at Coqualeetza c1900, Chilliwack Archives.
Figure 2, right. Mary Peters c1978, in E. Hawkins, photo Norman Hawkins

Connecting the Thread to Ancestral Memory: The *Stó:lō* Revival

In the Chilliwack and Sardis communities of the Fraser Valley in the early 1960s the interest of a non-aboriginal advocate coincided with a stirring among a few elders to spur a revival of loom weaving. Also, unlike their urban *Musqueam* counterparts, the *Stó:lō* were living in the midst of sheep farming and they retained dormant but remembered skills in their midst.

Oliver Wells, the advocate, was an exceptional man – a progressive farmer and naturalist whose pioneer family homesteaded in the Chilliwack Valley in the same year of Canada’s confederation in 1867.

By the time he was engaging many elders in taped conversations encompassing all aspects of culture, the *Stó:lō* and Wells families had enjoyed three generations of good relations. Oliver Wells practiced what we would now call material culture, learning as much as possible about the heritage, function and meaning of various artifacts. With a ‘hands on’ approach, Wells learned how the weaving was done, built looms and dyed wool from his own sheep in natural colours and set about to interest his *Stó:lō* neighbours.

Turning to elders he found a key resource in Mary Peters for the ancestral connection needed to rekindle traditional weaving. (Fig. 2) According to an urban newspaper reviewing the revival in 1973, the actual impetus came ten years earlier from a Chilliwack elder Amy Cooper (“who found it easy to associate with white people”).¹³ When she took the keenly interested Oliver Wells to see the work of a shy weaver on the Seabird Reserve hoping that Wells could find a way to preserve a rare craft, Peters’ abundant skills were obvious. The “LOCAL NEWS” section recounts the following, “Mrs. Cooper did not hear the end

¹³ Lloyd Mackey, *Group revives art that almost died*, Monday, The Columbian, January 8, 1973.

of Mrs. Peters' unhappiness over the white man's intrusion for months, but Mr. Wells began a dogged research of the craft and eventually evolved a plan for its revival."¹⁴

Mary Peters did not speak English and was known affectionately as the 'one who knows everything' because 'she never went to school'.¹⁵ Peters possessed a wealth of technical knowledge; in the Chilliwack Valley in 1963 she returned of her own accord to the loom weaving she remembered her mother doing. In time the weaver 'came around' becoming pivotal to the revival that Wells encouraged.

Following his plan Wells outlined descriptions from anthropologists to *Stó:lō* women, showed them old pictures, made replicas of Salish looms, supplied Cheviot wool from his flocks and sourced mountain goat hair.¹⁶ Encouraged by Wells, Adeline Lorenzetto (*Ohamil* Reserve) studied a ragged corner of an 1830 weaving and made two models for the revival weavers. In these early days of the 1960s, forty years after the last known Salish weaving in the area, there was a remembered history that could produce a loom, a sample to unravel and some very interested local women weavers.

Key among the efforts of Oliver Wells to interest aboriginal women in their craft history and promote it, was an article he wrote in a Canadian magazine in 1966 which drew a commission for Mary Peters.¹⁷ Wells' marketing resulted in commissions for more *Stó:lō* weavers from the Government of Canada and exhibitions in museums in the provincial capital, Victoria, and the *Heard Museum* in Phoenix, Arizona.¹⁸ Not only can the early commercial success be attributed to Wells, but the widespread recognition brought new recruits.

The stunning loss of Oliver Wells in a traffic accident in Scotland in 1970 was a turning point. Within a year the weavers he had nurtured reached a defining moment for the revival. Hosted by Wells' widow and daughter, they met to discuss their future, again a source of interest to local press that noted, "The general feeling among the Indian ladies was that now they must unite and work together in solving their problems."¹⁹ Their plan, effected just seven years after the first tentative sample weavings was ambitious; a studio and retail space in the old Coqualeetza buildings, production of enough prepared spun and dyed wool to meet weavers' needs now that their demand outpaced the supply at the Wells farm and a joint marketing program that featured an affixed government approved label.²⁰ While still enjoying the encouragement of the Wells family, their future was in their own hands with a preserved thread of memory reconnected.

Spinning an Identity– The Revival at *Musqueam*

The visual concept of contemporary women 'spinning back in time' serves a literal and figurative function. It encompasses the mesmerizing ability of spindle whorls, the act of spinning and the sensing of an ancestral presence while standing at the loom, to reconnect with the past. Spinning is culturally significant to Coast Salish. Perhaps derived from the transformative action of controlling flimsy fibre into a strong yarn or the mesmerizing focus of the whorl designs, Salish spinning may evoke a state of altered consciousness²¹ that together with a weaver's spirit power lends a spiritual dimension to a functional act.

¹⁴ Lloyd Mackey.

¹⁵ Wells, O., *The Story of the Chilliwacks*, p. 91.

¹⁶ *Western Homes & Living/Vancouver Life*, *Indian Weaving*, February, 1969, 56.

¹⁷ John Davies, *Salish weaving, once a 'dying art' gets a new lease of life*, *Valley Magazine*, March 29, 1971, 7.

¹⁸ John Davies, 3.

¹⁹ *The Chilliwack Progress*, January 27, 1971.

²⁰ John Davies, 3.

²¹ Gustafson, *Salish Weaving*, 93.

Debra Sparrow is an urban educator, weaver and community leader at *Musqueam*, one of several women key to its weaving revival. (Fig. 3) Her individual narrative, one of seeking validation and identity, parallels a culture that has been gravely challenged. Feeling spiritually and culturally “disconnected” [pers. comm. unless noted] Sparrow engaged the mystical quality of spinning. She bypassed decades of dislocation to the memory of her proficient women ancestors. Although ‘hidden’ from mainstream history as they were not politically active, women communicated through textiles. Possessing ‘cultural capital’, they produced a revered and economically valuable product at the heart of their culture. This was the source of agency needed by Sparrow and others among her people.



Figure 3. Debra Sparrow weaving, 1986. Photo by Mila Cotic, University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology.

As did *Stó:lō* women some years before, *Musqueam* women at the Coast also turned to the elders who could help with their textile knowledge. They visited the *Sto:lo*'s Coqualeetza workshop and Wendy (Sparrow) John initiated the band's weaving group in 1983. In the process of relearning a cultural skill, the aspiring *Musqueam* weavers acknowledge the profound importance of craft scholar and Fraser Valley resident Paula Gustafson whose book *Salish Weaving* (1980) included technical information and an awe inspiring record of previous achievement. The book also provided a stimulus on a very personal level to Debra Sparrow whose comment, “I wanted to be one of those women... I had a role model. I had a reason to exist”²² goes to the heart of identity.

With the technical skill actually gone, not just dormant, extensive research was needed to get a sense of their craft. Whereas, *Stó:lō* weavers had a facilitator, *Musqueam* women had to be more proactive. With her own community depleted of visual sources of design, Debra Sparrow approached the University of British Columbia's Dr. Michael Kew, curator for the first *Stó:lō* exhibit *Visions of Power* and as well UBC's Museum of Anthropology (the beginning of a respectful and productive collaboration) for input.

²² Debra Sparrow, Journey. In *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*. Edited by Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing, Toronto: XYZ Books, 1998, 152.

Musqueam's revival commencing nearly two decades after the *Stó:lō*'s, was in the context of a wider craft revival of the 70s and an aboriginal cultural resurgence.

Sparrow studied outside sources, gathered the plants with which to dye, and drew on elder knowledge to help her gain a feeling for her people's history, not unlike the process at Sardis. Drawing further on the details that artifacts [Debra prefers 'belongings'] could provide, Sparrow was among band members who studied a number of the finest surviving Coast Salish blankets in the mid -1980s, some at major museums in the United States. They approached the ancestors' weaving as historic documents. Through tactile experience with artifacts, touch that included the unraveling of old blankets, and their first experiences preparing the wool and taking it to the loom the weaver found, "We learned what we needed to know".

In 1983 Debra Sparrow asked her grandfather, Ed Sparrow (b. 1898) about weaving. He detailed a vivid memory of the crafting of a ceremonial weaving for his own naming ceremony 85 years earlier by Selisya and Spahqia (great grandmother of the Sparrow sisters). The oral history gave a glimpse of the textures of women's lives as they engaged in a valued creative process to preserve a child's name in a blanket of cultural memory.

The message of empowerment from her ancestors led Debra Sparrow to take possession of her own narrative and retell it affirming her identity. Yet it is clearly still a negotiation of cultures, or 'two worlds'²³, one of which delivered an 'education' she says adamantly "that failed me". As Sparrow puts it, "as First Nations people, we believe that we aren't worthy..."²⁴ She indicates one step towards finding agency amid dislocation, "As women we start with textiles, we build our self-esteem on this heritage".

Revisiting the Revival - *Stó:lō*

Stó:lō elders explain that people who have lost or forgotten their history are *s'téxem*, "nothing people" with no hope of changing their social status.²⁵ How fragile, then, were the levels of collective cultural identity and individual self-esteem among Aboriginals by the 1960s. As Oliver Wells lamented, "They were so used to thinking that everything Indian was worthless."²⁶ The superbly skilled weaver, Mary Peters, would hide her old family rugs away, if people were coming to her house "ashamed to have something Indian"²⁷ before the weaving collaboration. Largely through the promotional efforts of Oliver Wells with its subsequent awards and commissions, her work was affirmed in a wider world, among her own people and in her own eyes. The weaving revival with its connecting thread to ancestral identity continues in contemporary *Stó:lō* culture albeit in a more fragmented state than foreseen in its infancy.

The benefits to self-esteem of women working together in ancestral ways in the revival continue to resound. Brenda Crabtree is a *Stó:lō* basket maker and instructor who learned traditional weaving as a young participant in the early days of the revival. She recalls those heady days with its vibrant atmosphere with a smile. "There were all these women (and sometimes an occasional male) working together during the 70s revival as we hand carded wool, gathered dye materials, spun and wove together." [pers. comm.] Archived clippings further convey the atmosphere as the Sardis weavers prepared for the first big commission of one of their members. The order for Montreal's new Hotel Bonaventure, to be completed within three months in 1967, "required 225 square feet of tapestry, bearing Salish designs

²³ Jill Baird, 1997, *Weaving worlds, colliding traditions: collaborating with Musqueam weaver and educator Debra Sparrow*. Unpublished M.A. thesis [microform], Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1997.52.

²⁴ Debra Sparrow, http://collections.ic.gc.ca/musqueam/debra_sparrow.html .2002, 2.

²⁵ Carlson, Keith Thor (ed.). *You are asked to witness: the Stó:lō in Canada's Pacific Coast History*. Chilliwack, BC: Stó:lō Heritage Trust, c1997, 90.

²⁶ *Indian Weaving*, Western Homes & Living/Vancouver Life, February, 1969, 56.

²⁷ *Indian Weaving*, 57.

in a wide variety of colors.”²⁸ The revival had a social, cultural and economic impact; drawing women together to complete tasks, reactivating a culturally resonant activity and providing earning potential. The help to Mary Peters underscores the ancestral means to meet a contemporary need.

Weaving was women’s work historically but notably there are contemporary male weavers. Men traditionally prepared the woodworked looms and spindle whorls,. In many instances men or young boys merged readily into textiles in the 1960s assisting in the heavy work of preparing wool and standing by proudly as women presented their finished work. This women’s work was repeatedly referred to in media at the time as a ‘hobby’. (Brenda Crabtree [Pers. Com.] uses the term ‘part time’ to describe the weaving activity of her grandmother Mathilda Borden who also had 17 children.) The weavers worked, as always, around family commitments. “The economic imperative, comments Brenda Crabtree, “was always there” and continues for present-day weavers.



Figure 4. Daughter of Wells, Marie Weeden, with Elizabeth Herrling, *The Columbian*, 1973.

Typically, the busy cheerful nature of the weaving revival is stressed in news stories. For example the caption for a picture of Frieda George’s grandmother Elizabeth Herrling (1916-2008) is; *Mrs. Herrling’s “hobby at times gets to be a busy job”*,²⁹ wording that belies any professional or cultural value. (Fig. 4) Overlooked were the hours put in on commissions by a number of weavers, the operation of a retail outlet by the guild, the purchase of 4,000 pounds of wool annually on its behalf and an ‘avalanche’ of commissions from such sources as the Prime Minister’s office and Ontario Art Museum.³⁰

Brenda Crabtree is of *Thompson/Stó:lō* heritage and as Coordinator responsible for initiating an Aboriginal Design program at Emily Carr University of Art & Design in Vancouver is well placed to comment on the revival of weaving. On its importance to contemporary aboriginal society, she comments, “It is a vital part of the fabric of the *Stó:lō* culture. For every rite of passage a hand woven piece [robe or garment] is the most desirable. It *still* indicates status on many different levels; it is *honouring*”. Hence for the weavers of contemporary pieces, their work is valued within the context of their history with many of the benefits to identity experienced by an earlier generation or two previously, still resonating.

²⁸ John Davies, *Valley Magazine*, March 29, 1971, 7.

²⁹ Lloyd Mackey.

³⁰ Lloyd Mackey .

The actual status of the *Stó:lō* weaving revival is somewhat elusive as the weaving guild that was undertaken so energetically in 1971 and had 63 members in 1982 disbanded after more than a decade of achievement.³¹ In its early days, Paula Gustafson, wrote of its complicated operating system and the challenges to weavers without business backgrounds. In the absence of an association, the regionally based *Stó:lō* weaving is less visible to a wider audience although local exhibitions, such as that at *The Reach Gallery* in Abbotsford, BC in 2009 enhance stature.



Figure 5. Frieda George, *Stó:lō* weaver holding picture of her mother and daughter, Squiala First Nation. Image by author.

Weaver Frieda George (*Teqwotenot*) (b. 1959) helps to bring current *Stó:lō* weaving into focus. (Fig. 5) She is *Stó:lō* of the Halkomelem (*Halq'eméylem*) language group living at Squiala First Nation in Chilliwack, BC. A weaver in the Coast Salish tradition of her ancestors since she started learned at 13 at her grandmother Elizabeth Herrling's side, her ties to the revival are close. Her mother, Margaret Jimmie is an accomplished weaver as was her maternal grandmother Elizabeth Herrling and paternal grandmother Theresa Jimmie (the latter two are mentioned frequently in the archival materials). In an unbroken thread Frieda George remembers her great grandmother Mathilda Thomas weaving.

In the way of her ancestors, granddaughter Frieda learned by watching and taking part as she learned spinning, dyeing and weaving. "Granny (Herrling) collected her own sheep shearing, 15-20 fleeces. I helped her with the cleaning and everything." [Pers. Comm.]. Her grandmother learned the craft from her mother when commercial wool and dyes were in use but returned to traditional methods with Oliver Wells' encouragement.³² Artifacts also played a role in the weaving education of Frieda George. She relates, "We would rent a van and Granny, my mom and elders would go to The Museum of Anthropology [in Vancouver] every few weeks just to look at things. Although Frieda George uses

³¹ Paula Gustafson, *Ancient Salish Weaving: An Art Revived*. Beaver, 1982, 13.

³² Lloyd Mackey

³³ Lloyd Mackey

commercial dyes on occasion, she is a direct recipient of the realignment to traditional methods begun in the early 60s; this is evident in her creative work.

Frieda George uses traditional design elements and a Salish loom as did both her grandmothers before her to create the mostly natural coloured and richly textured twined weavings that echo her ancestry. As the weaver presents her photo album of works completed to me she outlines the purpose of each weaving. The relationship with the spirit world informs all aspects of *Stó:lō* identity³³; this holds true for George's design motifs. "I use the eagle which has esteem and high power", she explains. Commissions of Coast Salish weaving continue a tradition of using hand woven pieces to signify spiritual meaning and confer prestige and protection to the recipient. George relates, "I made a cloak for [BC Lieutenant Governor] Steven Point for his great nephew's naming ceremony. The continuing tradition of bestowal, rooted in culture, in turn bestows meaning to her work. As was the case early in the revival when it was "possible to identify the weaver simply by examining the work"³⁴ there is some commonality in designs but the 'personal signature' or identity crafted by the weavers is respected.

The weaver is most eloquent when she describes the emotional connection to her grandmother and the role of weaving in her life. Speaking softly, she intones, "Being with Granny was just the best feeling. She was by best friend." Like the weavers before her, weaving fits around family and her work at a pre-school. "I'd love to be weaving all day. I feel free when I weave." But she outlines other choices, "I need to support my family though; I have always worked. They're building a Wal-mart on band land. Maybe I should go work there." An income based on commissions is variable and the physical demands of her craft are factors. Aboriginal Coordinator Brenda Crabtree elaborates on the challenges facing aboriginal weavers now, "It is the logistics of materials; getting the looms made, keeping a portfolio of detailed photographs, marketing." Of the tradition of weavers in her family and its future, Frieda George speaks with pride of her grandmother Theresa Jimmie who worked on a commission for Prime Minister Trudeau's office in the 1960s. She comments, "I am the only one in my family weaving... I'd like to keep it going. I pack my great grandmother's picture with me for inspiration when I go to teach weaving". In this way she affirms her ancestral connection.

Revisiting the Revival – *Musqueam*

From the outset renewed weaving at *Musqueam* has enjoyed urban museum support. The curator for a recent *Musqueam* gallery exhibition, Candace Thayer-Coe, describes the current status of weaving at *Musqueam*, "It's booming. They have had perseverance and with the [2010] Olympics, they have a huge number of high caliber commissions". [pers.comm].

Rich visual representations of *Musqueam* culture now implicitly assert collective identity in public places.³⁵ The collaborative weavings of Debra and Robyn Sparrow and other *Musqueam* artists are part of a large scale installation of aboriginal art that welcomes world travelers at the Vancouver International Airport. The display greets visitors as they step onto territory that is at once part of *Musqueam* and Canada making the weavers visible in a historical context.³⁶ The visual display has a communicative purpose that Debra alludes to in *Journey* (1998); it is the possibility of memorializing ancestors whose ways of knowing were dismissed by colonizers and all but forgotten by their own people. In Sparrow's

³³ Carlson, Keith Thor, (ed.). *A Stó:lō -Coast Salish historical atlas*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2001,1

³⁴ John Davies, 7.

³⁵ Alexa Fairchild, *Canada Customs, Each-you-eyh-ul Siem sights/sites of meaning in Musqueam Weaving*. Unpublished MA thesis, Vancouver: UBC, 2001, Abstract.

³⁶ Susan Roy, *Making history visible : culture and politics in the presentation of Musqueam history*. Unpublished MA thesis - Simon Fraser University, 1999 , 3.

words the *Musqueam* revival has served to educate a wider world about “a functioning people with skills and intellect equal to any other”³⁷ in an ultimate expression of agency.



Figure 6. Provincial officials and *Musqueam* First Nation Chief E. Campbell wearing blankets by Sparrow Sisters. Mark Hume, *The Globe and Mail*, April 5, 2005. Photo by Jeff Vinnick.

Textiles can be used compellingly to enact agency.³⁸ This is demonstrated by a photograph (Fig.6) of two government officials and the *Musqueam* Chief celebrating the signing of an agreement.³⁹ With political purpose the setting clarifies that the action is located on *Musqueam* territory. It showcases three blankets (labeled *Sparrow Sisters*) against a backdrop of Coast Salish wall hangings. In a visual culture, it references an historic 1906 photograph of Coast Salish Chief Joe Capilano of North Vancouver that records a number of chiefs bedecked in the mantles of power. Each is in a magnificent Salish weaving in a proud display before Capilano travels to England to meet King Edward VII.⁴⁰ In this historical context, *Musqueam* leaders resist acculturation and assert a collective identity of their own making.

On the individual level, Debra Sparrow is now a respected educator, renowned weaver and savvy marketer of commercial enterprises often collaborating with her sister Robyn Sparrow. Of her personal journey, she remarks, “I used to be holding on by a thread – If I wasn’t doing the work I’m doing I don’t know where I’d be.” She now stands at the loom with confidence in her direction and abilities.

Few in number, the weavers at *Musqueam* appear to be thriving. Yet as recently as 2005 their future looked tenuous. At that time Sparrow had initiated an after school program for eight young girls. Typically girls drift away in from the craft in their teens as these have now done. Perhaps their best motivator will be the acclaim shown weaver/role models that include Krista Point, Vivian Campbell, Debra and Robyn Sparrow, all featured in a recent gallery exhibit.⁴¹ In what should have been a pinnacle in the continuing revival, the opening of the Vancouver 2010 Olympics highlighted dancers swathed in

³⁷ Sparrow, 1998, 154.

³⁸ Eileen Wheeler, *Engaging Women’s History Through Textiles: Enhancing Curricula with Narratives of Historical Memory*. Unpublished M.A. thesis. Vancouver: UBC, 2005.

³⁹ M. Hume, *Negotiators hail framework treaty deal*. *Globe and Mail*, Jeff Vinnick, Canadian Press April 5, 2005. S1&3, 2005.

⁴⁰ Paula Gustafson, *Salish Weaving*, 1980, 62.

⁴¹ Candace Thayer-Coe, *Sharing a Musqueam Gift: An Exhibition of Contemporary Musqueam Weaving*, Craft Association of BC, Unpublished. February 4, 2010.

ancestral weaving, including *Musqueam*, in thrilling and universally viewed ceremonies yet some felt it a token involvement that fell short of expected participation and benefits. [D. Sparrow, Pers. Comm]

The weaving revivals have served to educate a wider world while helping to restore pride to the culture and to the individuals who have woven with the ancestors in mind. For both *Stó:lō* and *Musqueam* peoples the revival has served notice that 'We're still here'. As an expression of a living culture steeped in its heritage, craft theorists and weavers assert that weaving, like culture, is not static and needs to look forward and evolve. As Coast Salish communities are experiencing 'a tremendous cultural revival'⁴²; weaving is inextricably linked to this resurgence of voice.

The determination of a dominant culture to force indigenous peoples to discard tradition may have 'stilled the fingers of the native women' but in a gravely challenged culture a revitalized textile language has extended a thread of empowering cultural memory to a subsequent generation of Coast Salish who may or may not grasp it.

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⁴² Bruce Miller, *Be of Good Mind*, p. 13.

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