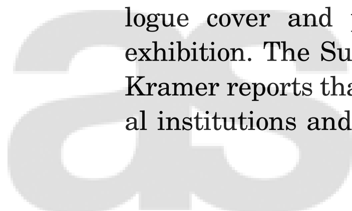
Review Essay: Dialectical Possessions

James Clifford

Switchbacks: Art, Ownership, and Nuxalk National Identity. Jennifer Kramer. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006. 168 pp.

The Nuxalk, formerly called Bella Coola, have taken back their name from the explorers, anthropologists, and government agents who, for two centuries worked to define them. Like many Native people today, Nuxalk are struggling for control of their collective life. Central to this struggle—along with reclaiming land, resources, and rights—is the need to hold onto a heritage, a culture. Yet holding onto a culture, controlling symbols, traditions, and sacred things, is ultimately impossible. Culture leaks. It is performative and relational, feeding on the recognition of others. The cultural "sovereignty" now claimed by Native nations such as the Nuxalk is thus about altering the terms of exchange—powerful, unequal, changing entanglements. *Switchbacks* analyzes, and is itself a production of, these fraught borderlands. Jennifer Kramer's finely-argued, provocative, and far-reaching book, based on extensive fieldwork, is concerned with the circulation of objects and the production of value. It focuses on traditional and contemporary tribal "art" in a sustained dialectical analysis of intercultural process and power.

Kramer tells the story of a widely-recognized masterpiece, the Nuxulk Sun Mask. Probably carved around 1870, this brightly-painted ensemble—an intensely expressive face surrounded by clan animals and the radiating fingers of eight open hands—has long played an iconic role in the Northwest Coast Gallery at the American Museum of Natural History. The Sun Mask, formerly a family crest severely restricted in use, now figures on the Nuxalk Nation's flag. It recently anchored the catalogue cover and publicity for a major museum exhibition. The Sun Mask also makes a good logo. Kramer reports that it has been reproduced by tribal institutions and individuals on T-shirts, for sale to both locals and visitors. Nuxalk are divided on the legitimacy of this practice, with some seeing an abuse, even a prostitution, of culture.



Recognizing Nuxalk sensitivity to the misuse of their creations by outsiders, Kramer decided not to include any images in her book. Reading her case study I wasn't sure I remembered just what the Sun Mask looks like. With a slightly guilty conscience, I googled it. A long list of sites instantly appeared, and near the top was "Tshirt d'Art." At this one location, more than ninety products are pictured, each one emblazoned with the Sun Mask: T-shirts (male and female, long sleeve, sleeveless, baseball, tank top, infant, "Spirit of Sun Mask Dog T-Shirt"), BBQ Aprons, boxer shorts, track suits and hoodies, several hat styles, a small universe of buttons, tiles, greeting cards, coffee mugs, posters, refrigerator magnets, mousepads, bumper stickers, teddy bears, tote bags, calendars, . . . thong underwear.

The page (eight screens) begins with a reproduction of the "Spirit of Sun Mask" and the following information:

> The coveted privilege of wearing the Spirit of the Sun mask was highly sought after by the Bella Coola American Indians from northern British Columbia, Canada. Traditionally, only members in their dance society were allowed to wear the Sun Mask. A four night winter ceremony was performed through dances which taught to the Bella Coola the spirit beings of the night sky. Now you too can wear the Spirit of Sun Mask. [Tshirt d'Art 2007]

Visitors to the site are exhorted to "Be Unique! Be Original!" "You will stand out in a crowd and everyone will be saying, "Where did you get that great design?"" In a world of post-modern self-

fashioning, the Nuxalk Sun generates profits while radiating personal uniqueness on the streets of Los Angeles, Tokyo, Sydney, New Delhi . . .

Many Nuxalk are angry about such uses of what they believe rightly belongs to them. "Now you too can wear the Spirit of Sun Mask"—one understands their objections to this sort of nonchalant appropriation. And only the most rigorous defender of the commons, of free trade in culture, will fail to wince at the thong underwear! "Tshirt d'Art" extends an all-too-familiar pattern of acquisitive "appreciation" for Native cultural productions. In response, tribal leaders have tried, formally and informally, to restrict the circulation of images and stories outside the relatively isolated enclave of Bella Coola. Nuxalk artists are criticized at home for selling their products in the galleries of Vancouver. Kramer tells of a carver, proud of his work on a traditional-style mask, who was at first delighted when a hereditary chief offered to buy the work for $500, sight unseen. His feelings turned mixed when he discovered that the chief's motive was simply to keep the mask from leaving the valley.

Many Nuxalk support agendas of cultural protectionism—many, but not all, or not all the time. The multiple viewpoints and ambivalences of a complex Native community are central to Kramer's account. She presumes no unified, normative "tribal" position, but evokes a history of alliances, tensions, silences, and performances that both link and separate diverse insiders and outsiders. Nuxalk must somehow turn both inward and outward, keeping cultural secrets while attaining recognition, sustaining tradition yet still making a living in a world of modern capitalism. *Switchbacks* is rare in its sustained focus on this predicament and in the complex, historically specific, analysis that it provides.

Kramer ultimately questions whether separatism and withholding can, or should, ever be ends in themselves. Nonetheless, she understands the reasons behind such agendas—historical reasons deeper than "Spirit of the Sun" mousepads. Her chapter on Bella Coola's colonial past is called "A History of Theft." Beginning with early trade relations (which brought devastating epidemics) and extending through the period of commercial fishing and cannery labor to large-scale logging, the story is one of relentless exploitation and loss. The provincial government's creation of limited reserves (without treaty or payment) amounts to a massive theft of land. Diseases contribute to a steady subtraction of people, and this is seconded by removals of children to boarding schools, with resulting losses of language and cultural competence. Missionary and government prohibitions attempt to suppress important ceremonial practices. And the research collecting of anthropologists, linguists, and ethnomusicologists undermines effective control of cultural knowledge by individuals, clans, villages, and more recently by tribe or nation. The sale of valuable objects to outsiders, under varying degrees of economic coercion, is ongoing. Kramer's story recognizes that some of these historical transactions have brought gains (employment opportunities, or the preservation by anthropologists of cultural knowledge that would otherwise have disappeared). Overall, however, the history of Bella Coola is told from a critical Native point of view, making it clear that Nuxalk concerns about retaining control of their culture are not merely the product of a recent, exclusivist identity politics. They are rooted in a long, bitter history.

Having established this history, Kramer goes on to show that the protectionism many Nuxalk advocate is both necessary and fraught with contradictions. Her account of the dilemmas of owning and sharing, hiding and revealing, preserving and exchanging, proceeds under a sign of ambivalence: an active dialectical ambivalence condensed in the book's title. The community of Bella Coola is accessible only by boat, or on a long, tortuous road. The precipitous switchbacks by which one descends into the valley become Kramer's metaphor for an anxious, necessary veering between apparent opposites: ". . . between essentialist categories of modern and traditional, Western and "Indian," . . . between culture with a capital C invented by anthropologists . . . and postmodern culture which is always in process . . . The metaphor of the hill and its switchbacks allows for both this movement and a feeling of being trapped in a dangerous space where choices are limited" (p. 15). Kramer avoids portraying the veering back and forth as something strategic, or under control. She nonetheless understands it as a kind of entangled agency, integral to the work of Nuxalk identity-formation in a postmodern, unevenly postcolonial, world.

In a trenchant discussion of cultural "objectification" and "commodification" she argues against

anthrosource
www.anthrosource.net

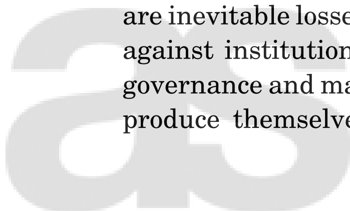
the grain of common assumptions. The objectification of Native people by outsiders is, of course, a feature of unequal colonial relations, often freezing dynamic societies in ahistorical stereotypes. Commodification tends to be understood as commercializing, or "selling-out," authentic Native art or tradition. Kramer extends recent scholarship by Daniel Miller, Nicholas Thomas, and Fred Meyers that complicates these negative assumptions about objectification and commodification. Following Miller, she draws on Hegel's *Phenomenology* to argue that objectification should be conceived processually, as a distancing or externalization followed by recognition and re-incorporation. Self-objectification (never separate from the meanings and categories supplied by others) is thus a fundamental process through which human subjects grow and develop. To objectify one's culture means to regard it as something to be achieved, defended, valued, owned. Culture (along with "identity," "tribe," "nation," "heritage," or "art") is constantly externalized and repossessed in a relational process of self-identification in new circumstances.

"Commodification" can be understood as part of this externalization, necessarily caught up with exchange and recognition, with the power and desire of others. For several centuries, groups like the Nuxalk have been active in capitalist markets and systems of production. But from even earlier times, forms of payment for exchanged cultural products (a mask, a dance, a story, a song . . .) have been part of Native social practice. For Kramer, capitalist commodity systems such as markets for "tribal arts" do not so much replace or corrupt prior forms of exchange as rearticulate and transform them. To be a successful artist, one's work needs to be valued, by cultural insiders and outsiders. Valuing is a process with both moral and economic aspects; and in the modern world, capitalist exchange value will always be part of the equation, to differing degrees depending on political and social circumstances.

What is true for individual cultural producers applies at the level of tribal recognition, a political project obliging Native people to "buy into" a liberal capitalist world of identities and cultures. There are inevitable losses and gains. Working within and against institutionalized systems of multicultural governance and markets in art and culture, Nuxalk produce themselves as artists, heritage workers, and members of a nation. Kramer shows that by gaining external respect and recognition they achieve a certain power, but on terms they cannot control. The concrete options are always materially and historically constrained. Producing art for sale is one of a few relatively stable sources of income in Bella Coola. And existing as a recognized "tribe" or "nation" is a necessary compromise with the state in order to sustain a line of defense against the pressures of a dominant society.

Kramer's interest in the circulation and control of cultural objects and symbols is not limited to "insider/outsider" relations. An illuminating, and sobering, chapter on the work of a Native-run school in Bella Coola, *Acwsalcta*, explores intractable dilemmas in the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations. Complex negotiations of separation and engagement, secrecy and sharing, are once again at stake. The school, a result of parents' frustration with state-run education, appeals strongly to Nuxalk tradition as a basis for Native identities. Ideally, traditional knowledge and Western academic norms will be combined to offer students "the best of two worlds." In practice, the project is fraught with cross-purposes, a site of both hope and frustration. People at *Acwsalcta* argue over the pedagogical balance of oral and written epistemologies. They struggle over rights of ownership (individual, familial, or tribal) for songs, dances and stories. And they debate to what extent modern technologies should be allowed in a tradition-based curriculum. Each of these choices involves recurring, sometimes hard, negotiation. Frustration takes its toll on teachers. The commitment of youth to something more than "play acting" cultural performances—to serious language learning, for example—remains uncertain. In this, as in other chapters, conservative traditionalism and cultural separatism appear as moments in a process, acts of division and negotiation both inside Bella Coola and in cross-border traffic—without guaranteed outcomes.

A chapter on the repatriation of objects from museum collections focuses on the complexity of homecomings. In the case of physical repatriations, objects once owned by individuals or families now tend to be considered "tribal" property. Repatriation is thus a matter of rearticulation in new circumstances rather than of return to an original condition. The change in identifications brings


anthrosource
www.anthrosource.net

ambivalence, and many individuals "feel caught between their loyalty to their families and their loyalty to the Nuxalk Nation" (p. 93). Kramer ultimately questions the assumption that all Nuxalk cultural objects properly belong in Bella Coola. Even if this were practically possible, it would not be good for tribal dynamism, "an intercultural process of identity production" (p. 100). To thrive, both tribes and individual artists need their productions to be circulated, shared, bought and sold. The terms of this circulation and exchange are what count.

Kramer shows these terms being challenged and re-negotiated in today's museum settings. Native "ownership" of objects held in metropolitan collections is now manifested in multiple ways: by entering into collaborative relationships with curators; by establishing recognized zones of sacredness and secrecy; by selectively withdrawing certain objects from public view while allowing others to be seen; and by performing what Kramer calls "figurative repatriation." Under pressure, major museums, like the UBC Museum of Anthropology (where Kramer holds a joint appointment), or the Smithsonian Institution's Arctic Studies Center, have been developing creative ways for indigenous artists, elders or students to visit, handle, even borrow objects from their collections (for use as models or in ceremonies). High quality photos and electronic databases make distant objects more accessible. Visits to collections in Europe, the United States, and Canada can reunite Native elders and artists with heritage objects acquired more than a century ago, contacts that re-circulate powerful stories and symbols. In museums it is increasingly accepted that ethical interpretation and stewardship of objects means taking Native protocols into account. These multiple forms of ownership and repatriation forge new kinds of connection across the spaces of what Aihwa Ong has recently called "variegated sovereignties" (2007). They all involve a "sharing while keeping," that is essential to the performance of culture in a world of differently-scaled nations, markets, and identities.

Toward the end of *Switchbacks*, Kramer returns to the topic of theft, giving it a surprising twist. She shows how theft functions in contemporary Nuxalk life, both in Bella Coola (where petty thievery is widely tolerated) and more broadly in the incontrollable appropriation of symbols and things by tourism, by fine art and curio markets, and by global operations such as "TShirt d'Art." If people appropriate your culture it's because they value it: this is the good and bad news of "theft." Given the exploitation of Native artists by metropolitan galleries, Kramer recognizes a real basis for Nuxalk fears of being ripped off. She also quotes artists who see the positive value of having their work in circulation, by whatever means. As in her discussions of objectification and commodification, Kramer is not simply defending theft, but bringing out the dialectical complexity of "walking this treacherous line of keeping while giving, gaining while being stolen from, that strengthens the contemporary Nuxalk sense of self" (p. 116).

If Nuxalk walk a treacherous line, so does the author of *Switchbacks*. Kramer invites disagreement by making strong, genuinely provocative arguments. She does this, however, with careful qualification and explicit recognition of contrary views. Wishing to sustain a conversation with Nuxalk, she avoids moralizing and the distanced tone of academic authority. The people in her book are portrayed with complex realism, shown to have predicaments, not symptoms. The result is a non-reductive account of socio-cultural processes and hard choices. But no ethnography today can expect to please everyone, and Kramer writes in embattled contexts. A few controversial issues of overall emphasis and political perspective may be worth noting in conclusion.

Given Kramer's sustained advocacy of outward engagement as against inward-looking separatism, it is easy to forget that she also affirms the necessity of holding back, of secrecy, in the maintenance of any self or community distinct from others. Kramer is most comfortable with a performative analysis of secrecy, as when she writes that "by refusing access to outsiders through photographs or videos, the Nuxalk are *signaling* the importance of their cultural capital" (p. 78 emphasis added). Like most anthropologists, she sees secrets as socio-political relations. In the traditional potlatch, she notes, special objects and regalia, stored out of sight, are dramatically revealed in spectacles of prestige and redistribution. It is in the nature of a secret to be both kept and given away, thus enacting and renewing social distinctions.

If Kramer is most interested in moments of sharing and revelation this may reflect her position

anthrosource
www.anthrosource.net

as a visitor in Bella Coola. The restraint, the tact, governing her fieldwork required that she not probe the content of tribal knowledge. She does not, therefore, name or describe specific stories, songs, dances, or objects of cultural value. Instead she discusses how, with varying degrees of conflict, anxiety, and ambivalence, these cultural forms are controlled and shared. "My goal," she writes, "is to respect the limits of representation set by the Nuxalk while also reading them as important messages about Nuxalk identity" (p. 22). It is doubtful that walking this line between cultural content and interactive process will satisfy all Native concerns about anthropological appropriation. Yet many will respect Kramer's principled agreement not to tell it all, while, in the areas she does represent, telling it like it is. Nuxalk will no doubt disagree . . .

Switchbacks necessarily reflects the perspective of those who chose to engage with its author, not the views of others who were suspicious or kept silent. The cultural revival process with its dynamics of recognition, valuing and exchange receives most of the analytic emphasis while the inward turn, toward separation, seems less interesting, less creative. Yet in historical contexts where so much conspires to separate Native people from their lands and traditions, staying home and holding back can be renewing acts of survival. Kramer shows this. Yet the turn inward often functions in the book as a foil, something to be repeatedly pushed away from. Its problems are abundantly clear, the dangers of engagement less so.

Kramer's own terms of engagement are those of an anthropologist and museum professional who values and needs collaboration. Like the present reviewer, she has little emotional or professional stake in drawing sharp lines around cultural "insides." But many Nuxalk do have an interest in keeping things to themselves, at least most of the time. It's hard to make "No" a positive act. But for systematically oppressed and powerfully solicited people, withdrawal can be an act of power, of satisfaction, even pleasure. Without the ability to withhold, to remain silent, to refuse the coercive interpellations of recognition, there would be no space for anything qualitatively different, or even creatively hybrid. The point, here, is one of balance not omission. Kramer repeatedly shows both sides of a dynamic process, but she always leaves us on the outward switchback.

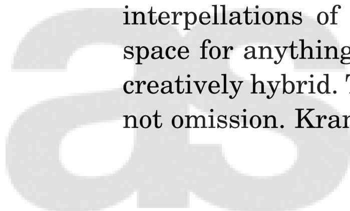
A final comment on the mixed blessings of ethnographic tact. Because Kramer chooses not to name names or show images (and this was probably not really a choice, given the many glimpses she offers of the pressures and compromises of fieldwork), her book has a certain abstractness. Personal names and direct quotes are rare: "One Nuxalk man told me . . ." "Another informant, a woman in her forties, agreed . . ." *Switchbacks* has little in common with the impersonal, typifying "native point of view" of an older ethnography. Disagreement, diversity, and mixed feelings are everywhere. But one misses the crystallizing effect of personal portraits and voices, the sense of presence that identifiable individuals can give. At the same time, there is something to be said for a sustained feeling of distance, reminding us that we are reading an interpretation, not a revelation. Ethnography is nothing if not trade-offs. Much is left out of *Switchbacks*. A great deal comes through. The Nuxalk, in this partial, lucid lens, emerge as humanly contradictory, historically entangled and dynamic. And their experience resonates far beyond Bella Coola in Kramer's acute analysis of the dialectical contact zones of tribal life today.

References Cited

Ong, Aihwa
2007 Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Tshirt d'Art
2007 Spirit of Sun Mask. Electronic Document, http://www.tshirtdart.com/store/index.php?catid=230, accessed December 26, 2007.

James Clifford is Professor and Chair of the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His books include The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art *(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988),* Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century *(Cambridge, MA: Harvard*


www.anthrosource.net

University Press, 1997) and On the Edges of Anthropology *(Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003). His recent work concerns local cultural processes in relation to national pressures and globalization. He is pursuing research on museums, festivals, and most generally, the performance of traditional identities in contexts of regionalization, ethnic resurgence, and touristic commodification.*

www.anthrosource.net