Book Review: *Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Theory, Practice, Ethics* Edited by Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod

Maureen Simpkins
*University College of the North*

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This collection of essays acknowledges and celebrates Aboriginal oral traditions in contemporary Aboriginal communities. Furthermore, many of these articles also tackle issues of appropriation, oral tradition in the courts, the effects of intellectual property rights, and the electronic media while drawing on the experience of Aboriginal community members themselves. In the cases and
examples cited, the theory is not separated from practice, which helps ground the articles in current realities and pushes ethical discussions in empowering directions.

These essays are the result of a conference held in 2005 inspired by the archived work of Silas T. Rand, a missionary who listened to and gathered Mi’kmaq stories in the mid-1800’s. Many academics, filmmakers, historians, and community members have been involved with researching and discussing the many layers of historical and community interpretation of these stories.

While making for a slim volume, these nine essays (by Andrea Bear Nicholas, Stephen J. Augustine, Catherine Martin, Greg Young-Ing, Drew Mildon, Sophie McCall, Michele Grossman, Tasha Hubbard, and Qwo-Li Driskill, with an introduction by Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod) cover an impressive scope of current issues concerning Aboriginal oral traditions. As those working in the area of oral history know, much has been written about the historical evolution of Euro-western culture that privileged the western written mode of communication over Aboriginal oral traditions. This collection represents a post-Delgamuukw v. British Columbia look at the theory, practice, and ethics involved when conducting Aboriginal oral history research.

All the authors are trying in their own ways to decolonize ingrained practices and approaches and stress the importance of oral narratives in their communal contexts. They provide us with many examples and options for changing practices and attitudes. There are several areas of focus for these essays that, when woven together, form an imaginative and challenging read. The topics of ethics, authority, and community validation are often the main themes interlacing the essays. Whatever the topic or practice, many of the authors advocate going back to the community for validation and interpretation. This is one of the collection’s strengths. There is a need for oral history practitioners who are working with Aboriginal communities to reflect on and learn from examples of how projects can become part of the community and how this process is often part of community healing.

My only criticism is that the collection is a bit uneven in terms of the length and depth of the articles. Articles are as brief as 6 pages or as comprehensive as 26 pages, which interrupts the flow of the larger discussion.

Qwo-Li Driskill ends the collection by saying that “we can continue oral traditions and imagine new stories for a decolonized future.” As historians, oral history practitioners, or academics we need to be continually looking at decolonizing approaches and processes, and this book provides many examples and poses many important questions. Maureen Simpkins, Aboriginal and Northern Studies, University College of the North, Thompson, Manitoba.