

The Heavens are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity. By Susan Neylan. (Native & Northern Series 31. Montréal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003, \$ 76,00. Pp. xvii + 401, ill., photographs, diagrams, maps, ISBN 0-7735-2327-8, cloth.)

F. Mark Mealing, Ph.D.

Volume 25, Number 1, 2003

Négocier la transcendance / Negotiating Transcendence

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/007138ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/007138ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Mealing, F. M. (2003). Review of [*The Heavens are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity.* By Susan Neylan. (Native & Northern Series 31. Montréal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003, \$ 76,00. Pp. xvii + 401, ill., photographs, diagrams, maps, ISBN 0-7735-2327-8, cloth.)]. *Ethnologies*, 25(1), 279–283.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/007138ar>

to accept readings of core meaning that are based on rare and remote variants.

Relatively minor criticisms aside, *Recentering Anglo-American Folksong* is an important collection of essays. In the current interpretive environment, scholarship sometimes appears to possess the license to say anything. It is therefore gratifying to read studies that put data first and that have as their principal goal the illumination and understanding of the lore itself. That, after all, is what I signed up for.

References

- Abrahams, Roger D. 1987. "Child Ballads in the West Indies." *Journal of Folklore Research* 24: 107-34.
- Roud, Steve. 1994-present. *Folksong Index. Electronic Database*. Maresfield, Sussex: Steve Roud.
- Wilgus, D.K. 1973. "The Text is the Thing." *Journal of American Folklore* 86: 241-52.

James Moreira
University of Maine
Orono

The Heavens are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity. By Susan Neylan. (Native & Northern Series 31. Montréal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003, \$ 76.00. Pp. xvii + 401, ill., photographs, diagrams, maps, ISBN 0-7735-2327-8, cloth.)

The Tsimshian have lived at the West coast and Skeena and Nass drainages of northern British Columbia long enough to develop a distinctive expression of West Coast culture and to enrich that expression from traditions transmitted by other natives. The traditional heart of the Tsimshian way was the development of the self. The ancestral kin of aristocrats encountered supernatural figures, as myths described and rituals portrayed: in this way, Chiefs received status and power. Individuals of any class, visited by vision and trials of the spirit, might actively achieve a Shaman's vision, status and power to heal. A complex of danced rites, some acquired as the ideas that embodied them travelled from the South, provided means for those who could afford to mount them to pass through public, programmed transformations with supernatural aid, personified by supporting dancers. This novel

compression of the earlier modes was not like the chiefly rites, defined by class, inheritance or a passive role in process; nor, like shamanistic initiation, was it private, idiosyncratic in form, or requiring the isolated action of the protagonist. Thus the Tsimshian valued and pursued spiritual power. Spiritual power related, of course, to social power, and it was conferred and recognized — imagined — by the whole community.

To the Tsimshian came bizarre strangers with puzzling ideologies, and a daunting conviction of their own personal and cultural superiority. The chief ideologues were Christian missionaries, whose ideas were laden with complexities not obvious to all those who brought them: complexities not only of the original religious structures, but of millennia of theological controversy, Hellenistic conceptual terminology squeezed into first Latin, then modern linguistic paradigms; of wonder stories, wisdom, profound ethical challenges, luminous mystic vision; of grim patriarchy and vicious when not murderous lust for political power, even empire. The stiff-necked Victorian missionaries did not experience all these consciously, but they were shaped by them regardless, and the lusts of empire were there in plain view. These strangers came to stay.

Susan Neylan's thesis examines historical elements and processes of the resulting interaction, and aims to interpret the relations of the two societies unswayed by romanticized views of the supposed superior merits of either culture. The missionaries in their time saw themselves as the champions of light; they are vilified in ours as the pimps of empire. The Natives saw themselves as the people of the land; they were conflated by the newcomers into noble savages, or scorned as feeble and quislings. Neylan argues for a far more subtle view. The missionaries arrived, confident in their spiritual aims and authority. The Natives, correctly perceiving these issues would not evaporate, relied upon their own potent tradition and its heritage of adaptation to integrate the new spirituality by aligning it with their own perceptions and values. Thus they translated the powerful Euro-Canadian message into applications that the Tsimshian knew, to rectify and equalize the necessary interface.

Christian history abounds with such interactions, usually damaging; it does not surprise us that conflict arose. But in this West Coast context, the surprise is rather that the two traditions shared enough in common concepts that the Tsimshian were able to imagine themselves into adaptive roles (and, too rarely, the missionaries sometimes broke through to positive understanding of their clients). The ideological similarities

had components of historic transmission or of psychological archetypes or of cerebral hardwiring; or of who-knows-what: these are not the concern, but rather the question of the process the two spiritualities underwent. Neylan points out that two eventualities may occur: Reproduction, in which one ideology replaces another (much as a virus rewrites genetic code); or Transposition, in which syncretistic processes negotiate translation of the arriving ideology to align it to the indigenous one in meaningful and reinforcing ways (174a). This way the Tsimshian chose, aided by the harmonies in both ideologies and the proven ability of their own ideology to adopt and adapt fertile concepts.

Neylan discredits old stereotypes as she discerns these processes. The first stereotype is the original Victorian one: Natives are culturally and therefore perhaps biologically inferior to Europeans; at best they must be utterly transformed, then supervised; at worst they should perish. In the intervening century those debunking this view have slipped into new falsifications. In recent stereotyping, Europeans are two-dimensional demons and Natives are generally victims, perhaps damaged beyond recovery and probably colluding in their own subjection. Thus the only Native hope is to distance themselves utterly from the infecting culture. The fallacies of the former view are obvious. The latter view is more subtly false: it denies Native power equally, but it is shaded by the real damage the Europeans did. It is indeed necessary to consider, with George Ladd that

... the three intertwined effects can be characterized as three experiences of loss: loss of sovereignty (autonomy), loss of economic independence, and loss of cultural identity. Any attempt to focus on what they may have gained from their encounter with the colonists does little honour to the reality of their experience. Besides, any such attempt conceals from us the truth about our history and ourselves (45-46).

One might rather say, until these losses, or rather thefts, have been addressed, we may take no comfort from those gains. But to deny the gains is another way of denying Native power.

In Neylan's view, the Tsimshian took an active, creative role by reshaping European Christianity into modes that answered their traditional need for spiritual power and their recognition of its action. The instrument by which indigenous people were to be subdued they reshaped to reaffirm their human worth and to reempower them in sometimes challenging ways that the Euro-Canadians must either

recognize or deny their own principles. This exegesis is carried out thematically. Neylan compiles and discerns Tsimshian integration of the missionaries' social structures with preexisting structures of their own: for example, the alignment of denomination loyalty with clan identity; of revivalism and church activities such as band regalia and processions with winter ritual festivals. The houses they built with milled lumber and European facade exteriors had interiors laid out in Tsimshian floor plans, in obvious analogy with ideological forms. Perhaps more subtly, Tsimshian labelled and dealt with missionaries as with chiefly and shamanic figures; and chiefly and shamanic Tsimshian moved into the roles of preachers, evangelists, church organisation officers and nurses, where they not infrequently startled the Euro-Canadians with the authority of their action and discourse.

Tsimshian also quickly perceived and attempted to challenge the contradictions expressed by the dominating culture. After all, even Victorian evangelicals taught that one of Christianity's principle themes was liberation — only not just yet, if ever, for Natives, who were not of European race. Nor could the Victorians follow the archaic example of St. Paul, whose New Testament missions brought the Gospel to other communities, then trusted them with it as if it was indeed liberating. But by now the Church in its various forms was too ossified to imagine the virtues of the heathen.

For folklorists and other ethnographers, Neylan's work raises several important issues. First is the simple fact of her elegant and perceptive revisiting of the complex cultural history of the West Coast, with its daunting richness of tradition. It is easy to be caught up in the riches of tradition and thus to neglect the processes that forged and continue to transform a culture to whom transformation was a central principle and a personal goal. The second issue is the subtlety of the outline and power of the cultural interchanges that took place. The West Coast was not any other part of Canada; while geographically general statements are possible, they are not always practical and may grossly obscure regional realities. For example, government preceded most missions in the central and east-central part of Canada; missions arrived before all but tentative fumbings of government in the far west. On the West Coast, missionaries — many of them men who fit in poorly at home — ran early into conflicts with the higher Church authorities, who could sometimes be present on the ground. Consider, for example, the Anglican conflicts of William Duncan with Bishop George Hills,

and his final schism. The Tsimshian thus had the advantage and disadvantage of dealing with something by no means monolithic. Neylan's categories clarify the breadth and depth of Tsimshian response and tactics by which they lived through the imposed reality, yet retained as much traditional integrity as possible. Such figures as Arthur Wellington Clah, in deep control of his twin powers, Tsimshian and Christian, appear significant as an example of what can be achieved in drawing together two disparate imaginations. It is provocative to compare such contemporary examples of the same creative spirit, challenging, accessible and affirming, as the artist Lawrence Paul Yaxweluptun, whose dynamic interweaving of Native and European motifs, techniques and issues speaks clearly and loudly across the imposition of social boundaries.

This is a fine and exemplary work; it extends and advises our understanding of intercultural communication. The final issue remains one of power, which Neylan exposes but cannot resolve when she writes: "More often than not, the most significant 'traditional' Native social and cultural practices continued under Christianity, including some indigenous spiritual expressions, in altered or adapted forms" (249b).

The keyword is *under*. We see that neither Euro-Canadian culture nor Christianity have yet delivered Natives, including the flexible and creative Tsimshian, from the chains of Empire.

The book is well bound in the glued fashion, which means that it does not easily lie flat, annoying to a reviewer with only two hands. The scholarly apparatus is excellent and reliable, which one cannot always say of contemporary index compilation. I noted only 6 misprints and one bit of troubled syntax (174, lines 1-4).

References

- Ladd, George V. d. G. (c. 1990). *Shall we Gather at the River?* Toronto: CANEC, United Church of Canada.
- Yuxweluptun, Lawrence Paul. 1995. *Yaxweluptun*. Vancouver: Morris & Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia.

F. Mark Mealing, Ph.D.
Kaslo, British Columbia
