

“Numinous Objects”:  
The Ethnohistorical Complexities of a Residential School Bass Drum

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## Introduction

In the summer of 1998 dozens of unclaimed artifacts from St. Mary's Indian Residential School were resurrected by a small salvage team in Mission, British Columbia. The items recovered included books, school uniforms, priest robes, and, most significantly, musical instruments. Over time, the uniforms and books had become moth-eaten, tattered and decayed. However, upon their discovery, the instruments appeared to be relatively unscathed by the years of careless storage they had endured. Because of their obvious historical importance to the survivors of St. Mary's, the team in Mission collected as many of the instruments and uniforms as possible and transported them to Chilliwack, British Columbia. Currently resting in the artifacts collections of the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre (SRRMC) in Chilliwack, only three of the dozens of instruments played in the St. Mary's brass band remain in storage. It is hoped that, if enough information can be gathered on them, these valuable objects can be used in the interpretation of the residential school experience of the Stó:lō people who attended St. Mary's Indian Residential School and played in its band between 1962 and 1984.

I first viewed the instruments in the artifacts collections storage room on May 11, 2009. Because the glockenspiel, missing a few of its metal bars, and the bugle, with several rust spots hidden under a thin layer of dust, were stored in their protective cases, I was immediately drawn to the large bass drum that was fully exposed and perched above the other instruments. Attractively decorated with paint on its two heads, the numinousness of the drum was obvious. With its beat marks exposing twenty-four years of wear, this instrumental leader of the St. Mary's Indian Residential School brass band has undeniable historical and cultural importance to the Stó:lō people. It is eternally attached to memories of the residential school system, St. Mary's

Residential School, the St. Mary's brass band, and the band members who played the drum and marched to its beat.

Unlike the other stored instruments, the numinous drum demanded that I ask questions of it. I immediately wanted to uncover its life story, knowing that in doing so, I would discover the hidden lives of the snare drums, single valve bugles, bass bugles, trumpets, and symbols that survived St. Mary's. What I did not realize was that while studying the life of this bass drum, I had discovered the catalyst that complicated the residential school experience for so many of the school's survivors. In my search for the drum's history, I met seven of the women who, in various stages of the drum's past, gave the brass band life. Their bittersweet stories fleshed out the drum's history. However, their narratives also revealed the complexity of the residential school experience. Thus, through its association with a residential school, this numinous object complexifies Stó:lō history.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this study is to develop an ethnohistory of the St. Mary's Residential School bass drum. By discovering the biographical details of the bass drum's life, the true historical and cultural importance of this artifact to the Stó:lō people is clear; it offers another, more complex, dimension to the residential school experience that may not have otherwise been acknowledged. Thus, in this work it will be made evident through the stories of the St. Mary's survivors and the numinousity of the drum that the St. Mary's bass drum complicates the residential school experience. Contrary to the residential school historiography that portrays the students' experiences in an entirely negative light, the women interviewed for this project stated that, because of the band, their memories of St. Mary's are both positive and negative, often making it difficult to reconcile their feelings of the past. Finally, because of the drum's significance to the Stó:lō people, this study will also argue the fact that the numinous drum

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel P. Maines and James T. Glynn, "Numinous Objects," *The Public Historian* 15, no. 1(1993): 9.

deserves a place in a museum's collection. When it is viewed by the individuals who were once involved in its life, emotions and memories are evoked, allowing survivors' experiences to be told and shared. The sharing of these stories is necessary for the history of the Stó:lō people to flourish and thrive.

### Is the Drum Numinous?

In order to establish the cultural and historical importance of the St. Mary's bass drum, it is necessary to determine whether or not it has 'numinousity'. According to Dr. Rachel Maines and James J. Glynn, numinous objects are "objects we collect and preserve... for their association...with some person, place, or event endowed with special sociocultural magic."<sup>2</sup> These objects are understood to have great communal value and can contribute to a better understanding of a group's history while evoking certain emotions within their viewers.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the "intangible and invisible quality of [their] significance, consists in [their] presumed association with something, either in the past or in the imagination, or both of these, that carries emotional weight with the viewer."<sup>4</sup> This "emotional weight" provides the viewers of these numinous objects with a "validation of memory and physical connection to the past," thus facilitating the narration of the objects' stories through the memories of its viewers.<sup>5</sup> The significance of these stories is great because they are the "stuff of social and intellectual history."<sup>6</sup>

Following this understanding of numinous objects, it is indisputable that the St. Mary's bass drum is numinous. Of the eleven interviewees who had been involved with the St. Mary's

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 10.

Indian Residential School brass band between 1962 and 1984, one hundred percent of them expressed some form of emotion when shown a picture of the drum or when prompted to speak about the drum and the brass band. The drum is connected to a specific era in which the individuals involved had mixed and complicated memories and emotions; it is because of its numinousity that its stories can be told through the experiences of the residential school survivors who played in the band as well as the administrators, priests, and child care supervisors who worked at St. Mary's. Without a meaningful visual trigger to prompt their memories, the life of the bass drum, as well as the stories of the children who played in the band, may never have been told as part of the complex history of the Stó:lō people.

### The History of the Brass Band

In order to develop a history of the St. Mary's bass drum and brass band, I interviewed eleven individuals who had been involved with the band at various points of its life from 1962 to 1984. I showed them a photograph of the bass drum and asked them to tell me what they remember about the band. The responses to this question were great; the drum's numinousity and the memories that are associated with it allowed me hear the stories of St. Mary's Residential School Indian brass band in great detail. However, it should be noted that the following paragraphs only represent a small amount of the history of the bass drum and the brass band. Due to the small scope of this paper, I was not able to include all of the stories connected to the band's past. Thus, the following highlights only the early years of the band, as recalled by the band's former members.

In 1962, the administrator of St. Mary's Indian Residential School, Father Bert Dunlop, created a brass band for the senior girls at the school. It was thought that while the boys had extra-curricular activities such as soccer and other "neat things to do,"<sup>7</sup> the girls had very little to

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<sup>7</sup> Joan McGeragle, interviewed by Carolyn Bartlett and Kate Martin, May 18, 2009.

keep them entertained while not in classes. Thus, Father Bert ordered drums, drumsticks, glockenspiels, mallets, bugles, trumpets, and mouth pieces. Because the drumsticks, mallets, and mouth pieces arrived at St. Mary's before the instruments, the students were taught to play their instruments by blowing the mouthpieces and drumming on the tables with their drumsticks. When the day finally arrived that the drums, bugles, and trumpets were delivered to the school, the students chose their long awaited instruments and began to play. These new musicians made "a terrible cacophony of sound," which effectively had them named "The Rainmakers" by the boys at the school because of the weather the noise seemingly brought that day.<sup>8</sup>

With Stuart Dunning as the band's first instructor, the St. Mary's Indian brass band practiced playing the instruments one to three times a week, learning tunes such as *When the Saints Go Marching In* and *Camp Town Races*.<sup>9</sup> In an interview, two of the school's survivors enjoyed reminiscing about the time when Stuart Dunning was their instructor. While laughing, they wondered how he had any patience for the new band. Rhoda Peters noted, "I think he really had a lot of fun with us...he was teaching us right from scratch...What got me was "How can he handle all that noise?" He must have been a pretty strong man. He must have been really something."<sup>10</sup> In fact, it took much time and care for the employees of St. Mary's to prepare the band for performances. Students were taught punctuality, discipline, and leadership through their experiences with Mr. Dunning and the other adults who were involved with the band throughout its life.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Sharon Blakeborough and Rhoda Peters, interviewed by Carolyn Bartlett, May 21, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

During the band's first year, Joan McGeragle, or "Ma," the senior girls' childcare supervisor at St. Mary's, also devoted much time to the success of the band. She organized the musicians, helping them with the preparation of their performance and travel outfits which were white and looked "pretty cool" with and brown tassels.<sup>12</sup> The students were taught to sew, and they stitched the beaded birds on to their dresses and made their beaded headbands. Ms. McGeragle also ensured that the band practiced diligently for the upcoming parades. According to one of Ms. McGeragle's former students, the band was an influential part of her life.<sup>13</sup> The childcare supervisor "[got the students]...ready... to perform. She would drive the bus and get [them] all organized and... it was a big part of her life and [the band members] knew it, she loved it. [S]he'd be right beside [them] all the time. She made [them] practice lots and in the beginning [the musicians] didn't really know... anything about instruments," but Ms. McGeragle, had the students practice their instruments until they produced music.<sup>14</sup>

Within a year, the band was performing in parades in the communities surrounding Mission. Because of the success of its local performances, the brass band quickly became well known throughout British Columbia. The band was invited to join a native children's musical tattoo. This band would include students from many schools throughout the province who would march, tumble, and play instruments for large audiences. For the most part, the band members were excited to have the opportunity to travel and were proud to perform for the crowds. One former band member noted that playing in the tattoo was the most fun she had at St. Mary's,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Marcie Peters, interviewed by Carolyn Bartlett and Kate Martin, May 19, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

laughing as she remembered that the first time she saw Steven Pointe was during the tattoo when he was there as a cadet.<sup>15</sup>

Another band member highlighted the fact that the band, “was probably one of the good things” that came out of St. Mary’s.<sup>16</sup> Although she had lost the opportunity to learn First Nations culture from her grandmother because she was sent to St. Mary’s, the brass band exposed her to other aspects of First Nations culture while at the residential school. She explained that the band, “...taught us how to mingle with other schools and it taught us how to mingle with other sports within the schools because we would go and watch them and visit with them... Otherwise we would never have known Sechelt, we didn’t go to Lejac though... and Kamloops, you know we got to go see them, visit with them.”<sup>17</sup> Because of the band, the musicians at St. Mary’s were provided with opportunities that they may not otherwise have had.<sup>18</sup>

The tattoo became widely popular and from 1962 until the closing of the school in 1984, the St. Mary’s brass band performed in towns and cities throughout British Columbia, Canada, and North America.<sup>19</sup> For some of the students, travelling to California to perform at Disneyland, to Spokane to play at the World’s Fair, to Ottawa to perform on Parliament Hill, or to Vancouver to play at the half-time show for the B.C. Lions was an exciting opportunity filled

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<sup>15</sup> Rhoda Peters, interviewed by Carolyn Bartlett, May 21, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Marcie Peters, interviewed by Carolyn Bartlett and Kate Martin, May 19, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> The tattoo allowed the band to travel to cities and towns within British Columbia such as Chilliwack, Cultus Lake, Dawson Creek, Fort St. John, Hope, Kamloops, Kelowna, Mission, Nanaimo, New Westminster, Penticton, Powell River, Prince Rupert, Seabird Island, Sechelt, Tofino, Vancouver, Vernon, and Victoria.

<sup>19</sup> The St. Mary’s Indian Residential School brass band performed in Spokane, Washington in 1974 for the World’s Fair, Calgary, Alberta for the Calgary Stampede (dates unknown), Vancouver, British Columbia for the Grey Cup half-time show (date unknown), Montreal, Quebec (date unknown), Ottawa, Ontario to play on Parliament Hill for Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (date unknown), Seattle, Washington (dates unknown), and Edmonton, Alberta for Klondike Days (dates unknown).



with memories that they still carry with them today. Other more local performances, such as playing in the parade in Hope, British Columbia provided the musicians with happy memories for other reasons. It was through these performances that the parents of the students at St. Mary's could visit their children. Many of the children who had been forced to attend St. Mary's came from remote reserves or impoverished families; it was often infeasible for their parents or relatives to visit them. However, when the brass band travelled to the towns of the Fraser Valley, families could see the band members perform, and the students were proud to have their families watch them.<sup>20</sup> The band also provided some students who, as one St. Mary's survivor recalled, did not see their home or the residential school as a "good" place to be; thus the band helped remove them from both unfortunate situations.<sup>22</sup>

The St. Mary's Residential School Indian brass band sheltered many of its members from the realities of St. Mary's. This is not to argue that the musicians did not experience hardships as the other students did; however, for the majority of the women I interviewed, their negative memories are accompanied by positive and joyful ones as well.<sup>23</sup> The happiness that is attached to the brass band has complicated memories of the residential school experience for its former members. It allows stories to surface that highlight times of laughter as opposed to sorrow. As a result, it appears that there have been attempts on the part of the St. Mary's survivors to separate the typical residential school narratives of abuse and loss from their joyous memories of the brass band, thus allowing the former band members to reminisce about this time in their youth

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<sup>20</sup> Linda McHalsie, interviewed by Carolyn Bartlett, May 21, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Thelma Florence, interviewed by Carolyn Bartlett, May 20, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Of the seven women interviewed, only one insisted that her negative memories of residential school "overshadow" the fond memories she has of the band.

with happiness. While the negativity connected with St. Mary's will never be forgotten, neither will the joy associated with the brass band.

### Residential School Historiography and the Brass Band

It is widely understood and accepted that residential schools have had a long lasting negative impact on First Nations within Canada, as their purpose was to assimilate First Nations children. The result has been the loss of culture and family and social structures, and other negative impacts. While not all survivors of residential schools were abused physically and sexually, many of them "were subjected to abuse in the form of removal from their families, isolation from their communities, and the destruction of their culture, language, and spirituality."<sup>24</sup> The schools "...imposed conditions of disconnection, degradation, and powerlessness on the students."<sup>25</sup> The impact of this abuse has been passed down through the generations of First Nations people, resulting in negative social circumstances as well as deeply rooted resentment of the residential school system and the Canadian government.

Until recently, the negative consequences of residential schools have been measured by scholars on the collective level, rather than on that of the individual. Entire First Nations communities have undoubtedly been affected by residential schools, although individual experiences have rarely been documented. Instead, residential school historiography has essentialized survivors' experiences into one common narrative: that of the "hapless victim."<sup>26</sup> As a result, the First Nations' collective memory of Canadian residential schools is often

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<sup>24</sup> Jennifer J. Llewellyn, "Dealing with the Legacy of Native Residential School Abuse in Canada: Litigation, ADR, and Restorative Justice," *University of Toronto Law Journal* 52 (2002): 258.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>26</sup> Terry Glavin, *Amongst God's Own: The Enduring Legacy of St. Mary's Mission* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2002), 12.

portrayed without light, with the institution remembered solely as “a sorrowful monument, still casting a deep shadow over the lives of many aboriginal people and communities.”<sup>27</sup>

However, recent works have attempted to move away from this essentialization of First Nations history.<sup>28</sup> In his interview with Terry Glavin, residential school survivor Bill Williams was “adamant that there are many sides to the St. Mary’s story, competing and sometimes contradictory narratives that each deserve an equal hearing.”<sup>29</sup> While St. Mary’s is but one of the many schools throughout Canada, it nevertheless can be used as an example, demonstrating that the survivors of the residential schools all experienced the system in different ways. Thus, residential school narratives must continue to incorporate the many stories and accounts that have broadened the scope of residential school historiography in recent years.

The St. Mary’s bass drum complicates the essentialists’ history of residential schools. As a numinous object, the drum has stories connecting it to the residential school system. By scratching a little more than the surface of the drum and brass band’s story through the survivors’ memories, it becomes clear that the residential school experience is quite complex. Because it is not possible to separate the St. Mary’s Residential School Indian brass band from the institution that created it, survivors’ narratives are unexpectedly filled with a multiplicity of emotions. Of the seven former band members interviewed for this project, all of them struggled with the fact that their joyous memories of camaraderie, leadership, skill building, and travel, are attached to the memories of an institution that stripped them of their family and cultural ties during their youth.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>28</sup> For examples of recent works that complicate residential school historiography see Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey, *Stolen From Our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1997) and Terry Glavin, *Amongst God’s Own: The Enduring Legacy of St. Mary’s Mission* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Glavin, 49.

During one of the interviews, the interviewee first cried, nostalgic for the days when she played in the brass band, and later became tearful, upset due to the fact that she was never able to build a close relationship with her family because she was raised at St. Mary's, a far distance from her community.<sup>30</sup> This interview was not the only instance when such a range of emotions occurred. In another interview, a woman who left St. Mary's in 1968, was happy to speak of her experiences in the brass band. However, also implicit in her stories were feelings of guilt; this survivor admitted that, while she has few complaints about her time at St. Mary's, she feels great remorse for the other survivors who did suffer.<sup>31</sup> This survivor explained that the boys who attended the school during the same period did not have the same opportunities as the girls in the band. In addition, she noted that the level of abuse in the boys' side of St. Mary's was significantly higher than those on the girls' side. Thus, while the girls were given chances to escape St. Mary's through travel and performances, the boys were forced to endure their time at the school in a much more negative atmosphere, with fewer opportunities to escape. For the survivors I interviewed, positive memories are complicated because they are coupled with negative ones; this is a result of the residential school context in which the band and bass drum existed.

### Where Does the Drum Belong?

The St. Mary's bass drum is connected to a complex period in Stó:lō history. Because of its numinousity, it should undoubtedly be displayed publicly so that its stories can be felt and shared by its viewers. However, as the drum is a relic of a residential school, its place in a museum collection is somewhat controversial; this type of object has not typically been studied by academics and professionals. Instead, anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, and

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<sup>30</sup> Thelma Florence, interviewed by Carolyn Bartlett, May 20, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Rhoda Peters, interviewed by Carolyn Bartlett, May 21, 2009.

museologists have valued and sought after traditional aboriginal items such as masks and carvings as well as “looms, cradles, fishing nets and hooks, cooking boxes, weapons, bark and woven cloaks.”<sup>32</sup> Particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, these artifacts were (accurately) perceived to be the remains of a dying society as “civilization was everywhere pushing the primitive to the wall, destroying the material culture and even extinguishing the native stock itself.”<sup>33</sup> While today, collections of traditional aboriginal pieces contribute to our knowledge of the richness of First Nations and their culture, the St. Mary’s bass drum is, instead, an object that reminds us of a systemic plan to eradicate Canada’s First Nations.

From 1875 until the 1930s, in an attempt to ‘preserve’ aboriginal culture, there was a “museum scramble” in Canada, in which the aboriginal artifacts, or ‘fruit’ of the “great harvests,” were “pursued sometimes with respect, occasionally with rapacity, often with avarice.”<sup>34</sup> Following this “scramble,” traditional aboriginal objects became increasingly less available. While, in recent years, there has been a revival of First Nations culture, many First Nations people do not create their traditional tools and artwork any longer as it has been difficult for a culture to survive when its people have “all suffered dislocations from alcohol and disease, and many were affected by the restrictions on fishing and land use, by the coming of missionaries and boarding schools” throughout the past several decades.<sup>35</sup> Today, aboriginal art and artifacts are still collected, although the collecting “has become largely a matter of old pieces recycling among collectors and dealers, of a few family heirlooms inherited from European pioneers coming onto the market or being donated to museums, or of repatriation measures

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<sup>32</sup> Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985), 244.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

undertaken by Canadian museums.”<sup>36</sup> It is for this reason that other objects relevant to First Nations history and culture, such as the St. Mary’s bass drum, should be documented and integrated into ethnohistorical records.

A new reliance upon aboriginal artifacts that have not typically been studied and researched will enrich the historical and cultural knowledge of First Nations in Canada. Items such as the St. Mary’s bass drum introduce new questions and allow for the complexification of memories and “stories that [have] confined aboriginal people to the role of the hapless victim.”<sup>37</sup> While traditional artifacts are important for the maintenance or revival of cultures, items such as the St. Mary’s bass drum are significant to the development of a richer history of the aboriginal experience during the residential school era. It is only in recent years that material remnants from residential schools have been given credence as valuable artifacts by scholars and museologists. This is perhaps, in part, due to the fact that the closing of residential schools happened quite recently in Canadian history and thus the artifacts are not yet considered to be historically important; although, it is also because objects such as old uniforms and instruments from residential schools are not the types of artifacts that have typically been studied by scholars and collected by museums. However, as demonstrated by the St. Mary’s Residential School bass drum, these numinous artifacts offer narratives of happiness and sorrow, told by the voices of the individuals who survived to share their stories.

Because the history of numinous objects, such as the bass drum, cannot be effectively documented without the participation of the individuals involved in their lives, the collecting of artifacts from the residential school era should only be achieved through the consultation of and involvement with aboriginal people. However, historically, it was thought by non-native

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>37</sup> Glavin, 12.

collectors that “[t]he objects of research do not have a voice and do not contribute to research or science.”<sup>38</sup> It was also suggested that “An object has no life force, no humanity, no spirit of its own, so therefore ‘it’ cannot make an active contribution.”<sup>39</sup> Instead, the act of “[c]ollecting—at least in the West, where time is generally thought to be linear and irreversible—implied a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss.” As a result, in recent years, aboriginal peoples are making “attempts to reclaim ancestral remains and other cultural items... belonging to their people.”<sup>40</sup> This reclamation, however, should not only be done with traditional objects. First Nations within Canada, for example, should reclaim their history by uncovering the stories connected to their tumultuous past. For the Stó:lō people of British Columbia, developing an ethnohistory of the St. Mary’s bass drum is a way for them to re-represent their stories, culture, and involvement in an institution that shaped so many of their lives.

### Concluding Comments

The primary goal of this study is to develop an ethnohistory of the St. Mary’s Residential School bass drum that is currently being stored at the SRRMC offices of the Stó:lō in British Columbia. By interviewing eleven individuals who had been involved with the drum throughout its life, I was able to uncover the historical, cultural, and biographical significance of this numinous object. However, in this search for the drum’s story, I also stumbled upon issues that complexify the history of the drum as well as the experiences of the musicians who played the drum and marched to its beat. By recounting their adventures in the musical tattoo, the camaraderie amongst the band mates, and their travel experiences, the former band members provided me with information regarding the St. Mary’s brass band, its bass drum, as well as new

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<sup>38</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

perspectives on an increasingly complex period of their lives that forces us to re-think the history of residential schools. These new revelations challenge us to put personal faces onto the students and staff, and to recognize that within a single school there are diverse experiences over time, across genders, and even within the experiences of an individual student. The numinousity of the St. Mary's bass drum has encouraged the surfacing of diverse residential school narratives while opening up channels of dialogue amongst the St. Mary's survivors. This new dialogical openness has allowed for the further development of the ethnohistory of the Stó:lō people, while encouraging a reassessment of the historiography of residential schools and traditional First Nations museology.



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