

Thinking through Local and Regional Histories: Recent Research at Dionisio Point and in the Outer Gulf Islands

Colin Grier

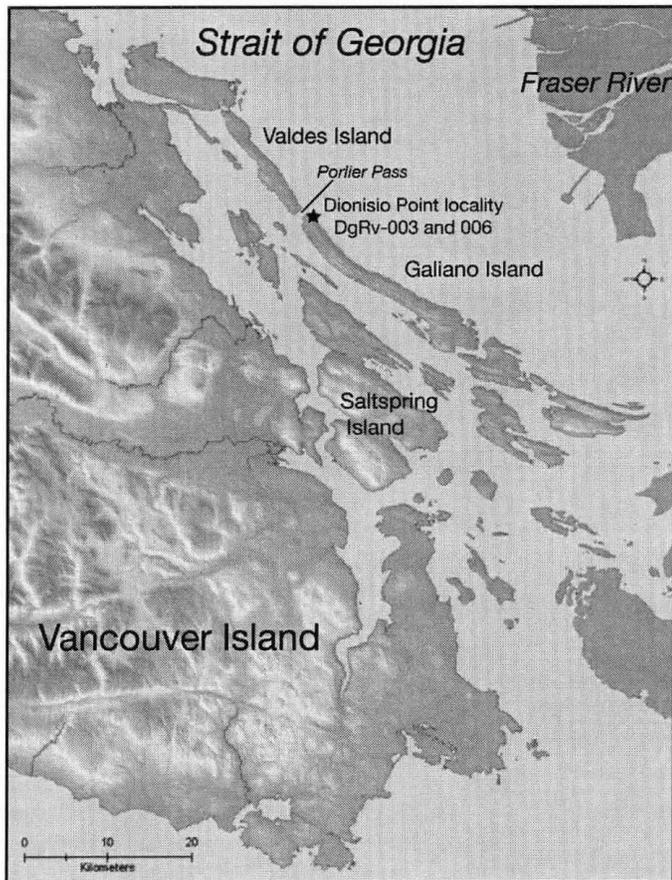


Figure 1. Map of the southwestern coast of British Columbia showing the location of the Dionisio Point locality and other key locations referenced in the text.

I first visited the Dionisio Point site (Borden number DgRv-003) in the summer of 1996. At the time I was working on my first field project on the Northwest Coast. This project was a wide area excavation of several plankhouse depressions at the Shingle Point site (DgRv-002) on southwestern Valdes Island, a project directed by R.G. Matson of the University of British Columbia. A boat trip to Dionisio Point, some 5 km to the south on nearby Galiano Island, was arranged by R.G. as part of his efforts to help us connect with the amazing archaeological landscape of the outer southern Gulf Islands (Figure 1).

Dionisio Point was an impressive site, with five obvious and large plankhouse depressions which dated to around 1500 years ago (Figure 2). At that time, only a handful of village sites of roughly this age with clear surface expression of plankhouse architecture were known for the entirety of the area now referred to as the Salish Sea. In the mid 1990s, household archaeology was a burgeoning topic of inquiry in Northwest Coast archaeology, and here was a site that could clearly provide the quality of

data required to examine the organizational complexity of large, multifamily plankhouses in the precontact Coast Salish region.

The site was relatively clear chronologically as well. Donald Mitchell excavated at DgRv-003 in the 1960s and retrieved charcoal samples that dated the site to the middle of the Marpole phase. The Marpole phase is a period of time between roughly 2500 and 1000 years ago during which many of the social institutions of Coast Salish societies known ethnographically likely developed (as many archaeologists have argued). To me, the site appeared ideal for providing answers to some important questions concerning what Marpole households were like, and for connecting household organization to processes of resource intensification and increasing social inequalities.

I commenced large scale excavations in 1998 in one of the 20 x 10 m ancient plankhouses at DgRv-003 as part of my doctoral dissertation work based at Arizona State University. These excavations revealed interesting data concerning the relationships among families within the large household, but also illuminated the high degree of specialization of individual families in various subsistence tasks and the amount of inequality such specialization promoted (results discussed in part in previous issues of *The Midden* [e.g., Grier 1999, 2002] and elsewhere [Grier 2003; 2006a]).

Despite these interesting results, one issue remained surprisingly difficult to address. Radiocarbon dating of House 2, additional houses, and external middens around the houses all indicated the village was occupied for a short period of time, perhaps as short as a couple of generations and likely no more than roughly two centuries (Grier 2006a). This relatively short term occupation contrasts with the long term record of many other large sites in the region, such as Montague Harbour (McLay et al. 2010; Mitchell 1971), Pender Canal (Carlson and Hobler 1993) and Shingle Point (Grier et al. 2009).

Why did this village exist perhaps for only a few centuries? And what kind of village was this? Why and how was it ultimately abandoned? As village excavations continued, it became clear that the location itself had been used after the village was abandoned, though only intermittently and as a seasonal resource acquisition location. No indications that a large village existed specifically in the location of DgRv-003 were found in Penelakut Coast Salish oral histories, consistent with our understanding that abandonment of the village occurred well over a millennia ago.

The specific history of the DgRv-003 village undoubtedly is connected to larger currents of history in the region. The village was situated in the last protected bay before entering the Strait of Georgia, and so suggests some connection to that ocean superhighway through the Salish Sea, and also to the Lower Fraser River area situated 20 km east across the Strait. Thinking more locally, the village was situated in Portlier Pass, one of three main passes that allow movement between the inner southern Gulf Islands and the Strait. Perhaps the village was positioned here to control

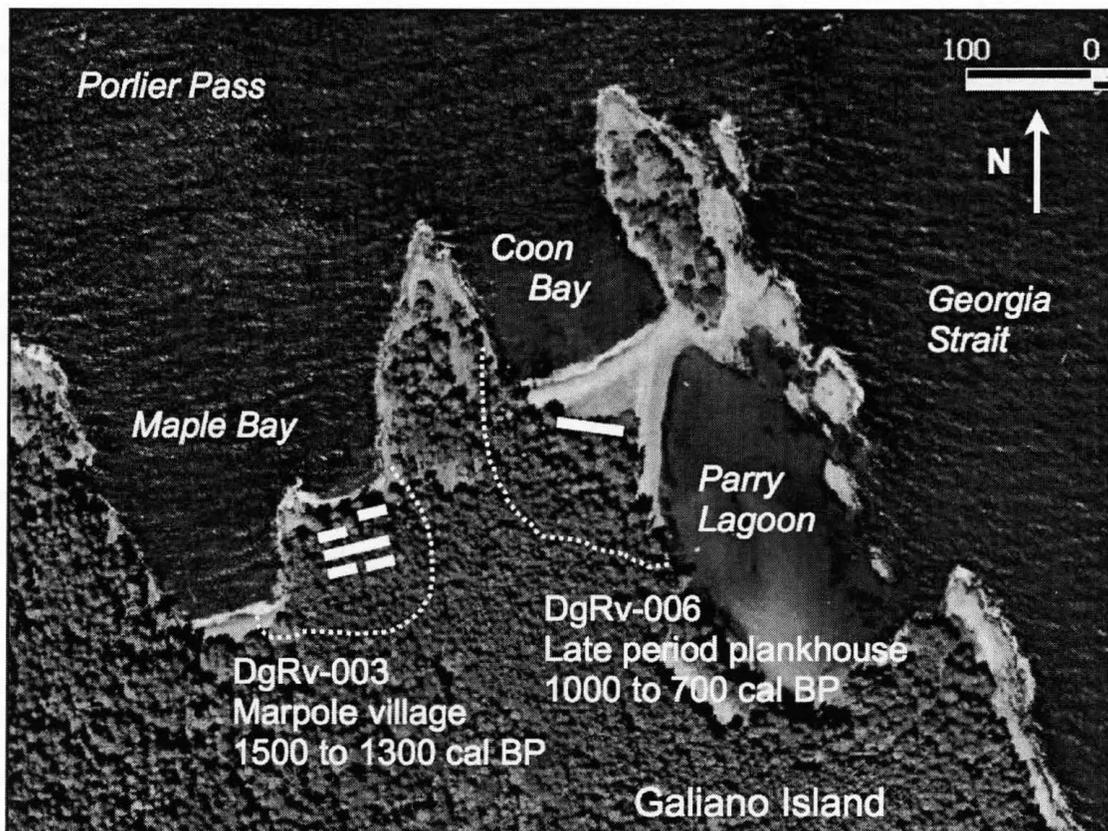


Figure 2. The Dionisio Point locality showing locations of ancient plankhouses (filled rectangles) at the DgRv-003 and DgRv-006 sites. Note that site boundaries (dotted lines) are approximate. (Basemap image courtesy of the Galiano Conservancy)

movement through the pass, either heading in or going out. Beyond access and transport, Suttles (1987) reports that Porlier Pass was used by the Penelakut in recent times as a sea lion hunting area, and so the DgRv-003 village may also have been situated to take advantage of the abundant marine resources, including sea mammals, available in the energetic waters of Porlier Pass. Yet, these possibilities shed little light on the original problem—why the short duration of occupation?

A Larger Window on Dionisio Point Precontact History

As with most aspects of archaeological research, the more you look the less clear your answers seem but the more interesting your questions become. In 2003 and 2007, inventories of archaeological resources in the Dionisio Point locality were completed, focusing on site DgRv-006 roughly 150 m east of the main Marpole-age village (Figure 2). This testing revealed complex midden deposits in the area of Coon Bay (Grier and McLay 2007). This spot had been on my radar for awhile, as there appeared to be an additional plankhouse depression on a flat area behind the beach at Coon Bay. Initial testing revealed it to be the remains of a 40 x 10 metre Late period plankhouse. This house has now been radiocarbon dated to 1000 to 650 years ago, suggesting substantial occupation was re-established at Dionisio Point some three or four centuries after the Marpole village was abandoned.

These new data, which came a decade after initial intensive excavations commenced at DgRv-003, put a much more complex spin on what had been previously thought of as a neat and tidy, though somewhat enigmatic, short-term occupation. Other testing

revealed use of the area outside the immediate plankhouse area over the last two millennia as well. Radiocarbon dates obtained from the substantial stretch of shell midden along Parry Lagoon indicate consistent (if not continuous) deposition of materials over the last two millennia. With the recognition that the Dionisio Point locality was inhabited over a much greater period of time than initially recognized, the questions have shifted to considering the ways in which its history of occupation mirrors that of other prominent sites in the region that were inhabited over as much as 5000 years (Grier et al. 2009).

We were also now presented with the opportunity to compare plankhouse occupations dating to the Marpole and Late periods in a single location. To facilitate this comparison, our objective was to obtain more data from the Late period plankhouse itself, and this work commenced in the summer of 2010. Since Coast Salish plankhouses typically have some sort of central hearth feature, and this kind of feature had been encountered in two of the five houses at the DgRv-003 village, my crew and I somewhat judgmentally picked a spot in the approximate center of the plankhouse depression and excavated a 1 x 1 m unit. To our surprise, we found in this exact location a large feature lined with basketball-sized rocks and filled almost entirely with sea urchin remains. Further excavation in 2011 revealed the remainder of the feature, which turned out to be a 2 m diameter roasting pit in which an unfathomable amount of sea urchin were cooked in what may have been a singular, large consumption event (Figure 3).

While sea urchin are often eaten raw, Penelakut elder

August Sylvester informed us that they are often roasted to the point where the spines and skill falls off. While straightforward to prepare, sea urchin are not necessarily an easy resource to collect, however, as they are found low in the intertidal zone and in sub-tidal environs. There certainly would have been windows of opportunity to acquire them in bulk during seasonal extreme low tides in mid winter and mid summer, supporting the notion that they were collected and processed as part of a short term event. All considered, the archaeological situation we encountered brings to mind some grand feast in which a large quantity of a targeted resource was collected, prepared in the center of the plankhouse, and which was then consumed by the household itself or perhaps invitees from afar. Feasting has been on the minds of archaeologists for some time, as described in a recent overview of feasting research by Hayden and Villeneuve (2011). Feasting has been argued as a critical mechanism through which individual status can be constructed, group solidarity reinforced, and extralocal alliances established and reaffirmed. As such, it is a important social practice in small-scale societies, and provides an entry point into the study of resource production, ritual and social power in the past.

The feature is somewhat remarkable in other respects as well. As we continued to excavate, we came across the atlas and axis vertebrae of a sea mammal, suggesting this was also on the menu for the inferred feast. Curiously, we encountered other parts

of sea mammals (at this point identified entirely as *Eumetopias jubatus*, steller sea lion) in different areas of the house. Putting on a speculative hat, one might envision this pattern as resulting from the sharing out of a roasted animal to other householders or invited guests. Adjacent to and associated with the sea mammal remains was a long nephrite chisel. This is an unusual spot to find a valued and still functional item of material culture, as Quentin Mackie aptly pointed out when he visited our excavations. While these are typically thought of as primarily woodworking rather than butchery tools, was this perhaps some kind of ritual deposit in which the tool was symbolically deposited with the remains of the meal?

As the excavation of the feature progressed, we kept our speculation in check, however, particularly without the benefit of having completed finer-grained analysis of the recovered materials back in the lab at WSU. Were we truly being presented with evidence of some singular and unusual feasting event, potentially even an ancient potlatch, that unfolded 650 years ago? In 2008, I presented a paper at the World Archaeological Congress in Dublin, Ireland in which I lamented the lack of attention archaeologists have given to addressing the potlatch and other communal food consumption events archaeologically. While all feasts are not potlatches, all potlatches likely involved some kind of feasting. As far as archaeological indicators go, the material remains of unusual consumption events may ultimately turn out to be the

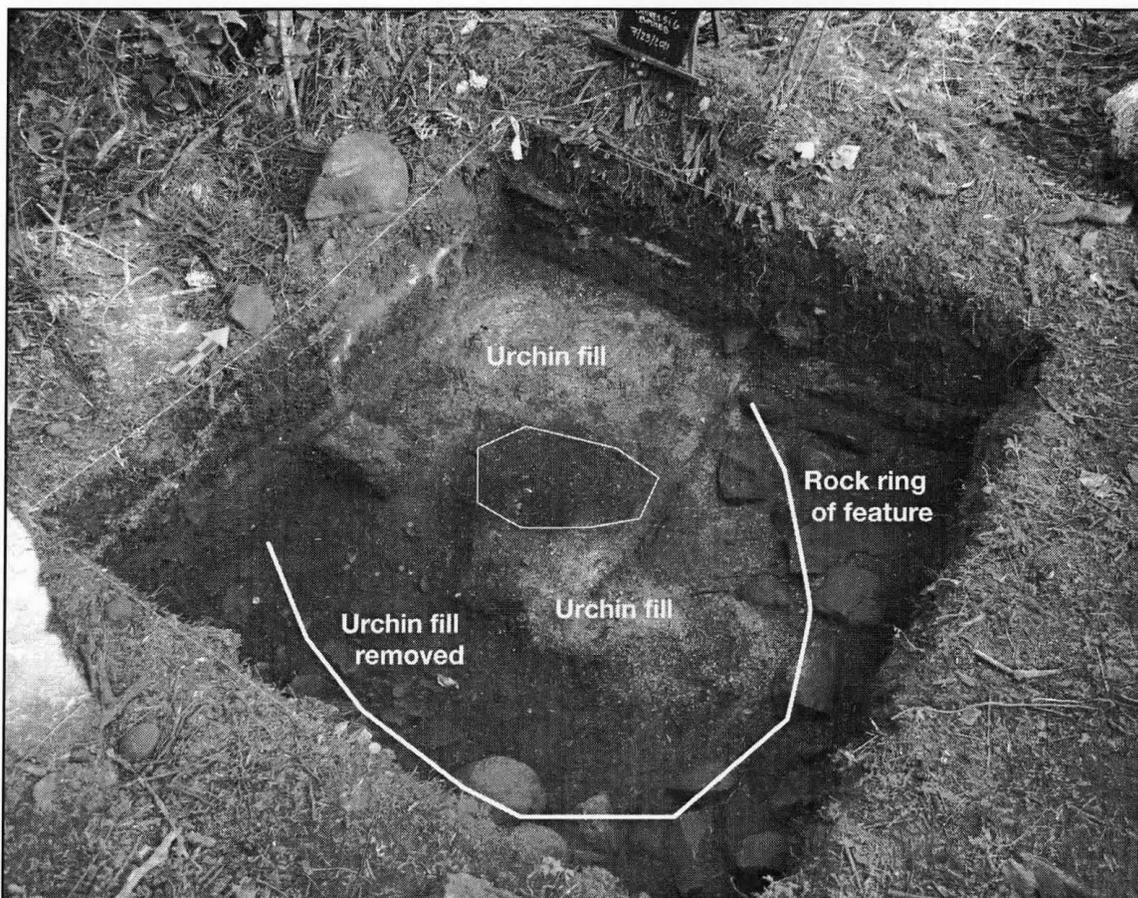


Figure 3. Rock-lined feature in the center of DgRv-006 House 1 during excavation. The darker area circled in the center of the feature denotes the location where sea mammal vertebrae and the nephrite chisel were recovered. (Photo by author)

best indicator of such practices in the past. It is interesting to note that plankhouses are a typical setting for potlatches, which, as I conveyed in 2008, can have the unfortunate archaeological outcome of mixing the record of unusual and atypical events with everyday domestic processes (Grier 2006a, 2008).

Some eight months after the field season of 2011, the fine-grained analysis is well underway. The feature contents are estimated (very roughly) to include at least 20,000 sea urchin, both of the green and purple variety. While some traces of other resources are evident in the matrix samples of feature fill we took (some of which have now been sifted through nested screens from 4 mm through 425 microns), the material is nearly 100% sea urchin test fragments and spines. The most pressing question for which we have no answer at the moment is whether the entirety of the feature reflects a single event, multiple events over potentially a single season, or a much longer accumulation of material. The surrounding stratigraphic context and discrete lenses of purple and green urchin point to short term use of the feature (or perhaps the last use of the feature), though additional data need to be collected and analyzed for certainty on this.

Beyond these data from DgRv-006, the record of household ritual remains very meager indeed on the precontact Northwest Coast, and in particular for southern coastal British Columbia. At DgRv-003, our excavations in House 2 in 1998 recovered two stone bowls in what appears to be primary context in two distinct areas of the house. These bowls suggest a connection to regional symbolic and ritual traditions during the Marpole phase, perhaps hinting at the significance of Dionisio Point in wider Coast Salish social networks. Elsewhere, Coupland et al. (2003) have argued that a predominance of mammal bone and an inferred feasting hearth identify House O at the McNichol Creek site near Prince Rupert as a "Chief's House." Other than these and a few other limited examples, evidence for household-level ritual in precontact plankhouses remains sparse, despite its clear importance (Coupland et al. 2009; Grier 2006b; Suttles 1991).

Coming to Terms with Complex Histories: Some Conclusions

With the recognition that the archaeological record of the Dionisio Point locality contains much more than just a short term Marpole village, my sights have turned to the broader southern Gulf Islands region. Funded by a three-year grant from the National Science Foundation, this research is now considering long-term ecological and social change at as many as six major village sites within a 20 km area of Dionisio Point. Part of the rationale for this shift outward in focus is the desire to construct a long-term, multi-site view of the region's history. But, at the same time, the new and curious data from DgRv-006 have returned my sights to the household context.

Thinking through how precontact history unfolded at multiple scales is key, however. As Stephen Shennan (1993) remarked some years ago, the archaeological record is a product of both specific, singular events and longer-term processes. This recognition forces us to think through how a singular event such as a large feast that may have happened some 650 years ago relates to much longer and broader trends of social change. In conceptualizing individual actors and the way they shape and are shaped by longer-term structures of history, it is perhaps best to recognize, as argued by Pauketat (2001), that history is "perpetually becoming." In many

respects archaeological interpretations are also "perpetually becoming", and I look forward to seeing where our explanations for Coast Salish history, at the Dionisio Point site and elsewhere, will end up in the years to come.

Notes

1. Most of the publications by the author mentioned in the text are available for download as PDFs at <http://www.libarts.wsu.edu/anthro/faculty/grier.html>

Acknowledgments

Research at Dionisio Point has been funded over the years primarily through grants from the National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. The privilege of working in the area has been afforded to me by the generous support of the Penelakut Tribe. BC Parks, and in particular Joe Benning, Area Supervisor, has facilitated much of this research. I also thank all the crew members over the years who have toiled in the dirt to bring the research to where we stand now.

Colin Grier is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Washington State University. A Canadian and long-term resident of Vancouver, he left to pursue a BA in anthropology at McGill University (1993) and an MA (1996) and PhD (2001) in anthropology at Arizona State University. After returning to Vancouver to take up a SSHRC post-doctoral fellowship at UBC, he joined the faculty at WSU in 2007. Having worked in the Arctic, Ireland, Germany and Korea, he now is settled on the Northwest Coast as his permanent study area, but continues to collaborate regularly with colleagues in Spain, Korea and elsewhere.

References Cited

- Carlson, Roy L. and Philip M. Hobler. 1993. The Pender Canal Excavations and the Development of Coast Salish Culture. *BC Studies* 99:25-52.
- Coupland, Gary, Roger H. Colton and Rebecca Case. 2003. Preliminary Analysis of Socioeconomic Organization at the McNichol Creek Site, British Columbia. In *Emerging from the Mist: Studies in Northwest Coast Culture History*, edited by R.G. Matson, G. Coupland and Q. Mackie, pp. 152-170. University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver.
- Coupland, Gary, Terence Clark and Amanda Palmer. 2009. Hierarchy, Communalism, and the Spatial order of Northwest Coast Plank Houses: A comparative study. *American Antiquity* 74:77-106.
- Grier, Colin. 2008. On the Cultural Track of the Potlatch". Paper presented at the World Archaeology Congress (WAC-6), Dublin, Ireland.
- 2006a. Temporality in Northwest Coast Households. In *Household Archaeology on the Northwest Coast*, edited by E. A. Sobel, D. A. Trieu Gahr, and K. Ames, pp. 97-119. International Monographs in Prehistory, Ann Arbor.
- 2006b. The Political Context of Prehistoric Coast Salish Residences on the Northwest Coast. In *Palaces and Power in the Americas: From Peru to the Northwest Coast*, edited by J. J. Christie and P. J. Sarro, pp. 141-165. University of Texas Press, Austin.

continued on page 16...

discusses outreach, the structure of research, and the potential to showcase previously silenced histories as core themes. Observing that an activist archaeology provides “opportunities for awareness of our common humanity, our common struggles...in the face of cynicism and despair,” Little raises this critical point:

We can think of our own self-defined activism as intentional action to bring about social or political change, but we must be vigilant and continually self-critical and questioning about the types of changes we advocate. If we aim our activism at progressive social change and social justice, we should understand that we may be aiming at a moving target. (158)

Overall, I found this volume a welcome addition to my growing collection of books on the politics and social practice of archaeology. However, the volume suffers from what I have found to be typical of edited volumes: a lack of synthesis and internal critique of the case-studies or themes as a whole. While the case-studies themselves present different aspects of what is being presented as “activist archaeology”—some more radical than others—Stottman’s introduction is too brief to problematize the concept itself, its philosophical foundations, what it entails, or how to evaluate one’s effectiveness in activism. Instead, Stottman articulates some of the core ideas—a blend of critical theory, Marxist and feminist critique, with a collaborative research structure—and then provides this succinct definition:

To use archaeology to affect change in and advocate for contemporary communities, not as the archaeologist sees it but as the community itself sees it, defines activist archaeology. (8)

Centring the needs of “the community” is an appropriate strategy to address some of the ethical dilemmas and historical injustices of the archaeological project. It is a long over-due response to the valid accusations that archaeologists have faced since the first obelisk was removed from Egypt and the first shaman’s grave robbed here on the Northwest Coast.

It is, however, a problem to suggest either a) that there is such a thing as one, cohesive “community perspective”—the case-studies herein demonstrate that there is not—or b) that this “community view” should be foregrounded at the expense of the archaeologist’s own perspective. Ironically, in this scenario, the archaeologist becomes an apolitical mediator between the community and the public, playing a passive role that hides their own politics rather than actually being *an activist*, which entails standing up for what *they* believe in. The lack of critical analysis of either these issues or the motivations inspiring “activist archaeologists” beyond a desire to “make a difference in the world” (Stottman 1), prevents this volume from moving beyond a superficial and simplistic notion of activism. This, combined with little reflexivity offered concerning the lauded but challenging practice of “collaboration” (e.g., La Salle 2010), means that the strength of this volume lies primarily in the diversity and complexity of the case-studies, which together demonstrate that activism is extremely messy, highly personal, and can be very painful—important truths for any “activist archaeologist” to consider.

So, in answer to the question posed by this volume: Yes, archaeologists can change the world. We do it every day, with every grant application that we write, every introductory course we teach, every question about Indiana Jones we answer. The key to becoming an activist is committing oneself to challenging the status quo, not just in archaeology but in all aspects of our lives. Swimming against the current is tiring, and it is a relief to see in this volume that the community of self-defined activist archaeologists, in what is typically a very conservative discipline, continues to bloom.

Marina La Salle is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. Her dissertation research focuses on the landscape, heritage and politics of Pacific Spirit Regional Park in Vancouver, B.C. She is also the Editor of *The Midden*.

References cited

La Salle, Marina. 2010. Community Collaboration and Other Good Intentions. *Archaeologies* 6(3):401-422.

...continued from page 9:

Grier, Colin and Eric McLay. 2007. Archaeological Inventory of DgRv-006, Dionisio Point Provincial Park, Galiano Island. [HCA Permit 2007-144]. Report filed with the BC Archaeology Branch, Victoria.

Grier Colin, Patrick Dolan, Kelly Derr and Eric B. McLay. 2009. Assessing Sea Level Changes in the Southern Gulf Islands of British Columbia Using Archaeological Data from Coastal Spit Locations. *Canadian Journal of Archaeology* 33:254-280.

Hayden, Brian and Suzanne Villeneuve. 2011. A Century of Feasting Studies. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40:433-449.

McLay, Eric, Colin Grier and Bill Angelbeck. 2010. Archaeological Inventory Study of Montague Harbour Provincial Marine Park, Galiano Island, British Columbia [HCA Permit 2008-046]. Report filed with the BC Archaeology Branch, Victoria.

Mitchell, Donald H. 1971. Archaeology of the Gulf of Georgia Area, a Natural Region and its Culture Types. *Syesis* 4 (Supplement 1). The British Columbia Provincial Museum, Victoria.

Pauketat, Timothy R. 2001. Practice and History in Archaeology: An Emerging Paradigm. *Anthropological Theory* 1(1):73-98.

Shennan, Stephen. 1993. After Social Evolution: A New Archaeological Agenda? In *Archaeological Theory: Who Sets the Agenda?*, edited by N. Yoffee and A. Sherratt, pp. 53-59. Cambridge University Press.

Suttles, Wayne. 1987. Notes on Coast Salish Sea Mammal Hunting. In *Coast Salish Essays*, edited by W. Suttles, pp. 233-247. University of Washington Press, Seattle.

1991. The Shed-Roof House. In *A Time of Gathering: Native Heritage in Washington State*, edited by R.K. Wright, pp. 212-222. University of Washington Press, Seattle.