

**Dianne Newell, (History)**  
*Interviewed by: Suzanne Boyd,*

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SB: Are you associated with more than one department at U.B.C? If so, how do you feel about being an interdisciplinary professor?

DN: Well, I am appointed with the History Department, but I am a faculty associate of Fisheries, the Centre for Research on Women Studies and Gender Relations, and the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies. And I was Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and there are 26 Interdisciplinary programmes involved there. I also have a Master's degree that is interdisciplinary, in Canadian Studies. So I have always considered myself interdisciplinary, I have always worked with people who are interdisciplinary. I think there are real advantages to being associated with interdisciplinary centres, to be able to plug into projects, there is more and more opportunity to do interdisciplinary projects now. But, there is a real advantage, I think, to being housed in one department where the teaching load is clear, and where the standards for promotion or tenure are clear.

SB: That leads into another question. Do you often find in your academic work that you have to juggle conflicting or contradictory expectations with regards to research, courses?

DN: I would say no, because I am in History, it is an area that's pretty eclectic. Because we have a good Honours programme that runs for two years there are good teaching possibilities in Honours. We have a graduate programme in which we expect students to do quite a bit of course work, which means that even if I don't create new straight undergraduate courses, I can try out new research ideas. This year, I'm doing more or less an environmental, cultural environmental seminar in the honours programme. In the graduate programme I tend to teach more issues around gender. The undergraduate course is a technology and gender course, so it is more specialized. At the graduate level I do a readings course and I quite dramatically change the readings each time. This year it is on narrative. In it we do a lot on gender. So I am switching methods and subject areas and different kinds of theoretical considerations, and I am sometimes doing things that are more Canadian research and other times I am doing things that are not as place-based.

I think that in departments that have an Honours programme and departments that expect quite a bit of course work from their graduate students, you have more flexibility in being able to introduce new lines of research that you are doing. It is the joy of teaching at the university when you can do that, it really adds a dimension. To me it's not just a responsibility, because I am an academic, that I have to do some teaching. It's a chance to try out the ideas and to get a lot of feedback from people who are experiencing life in a different way, as you know there is an age difference. Things that for me are a struggle I can see my undergraduates often take for granted. I realize that things I struggle with, they have no experience with. I came out of an interdisciplinary background with more sociology in my background than history, and people seek and respect those differences. So there is not a lot of conflict within my department, since the

university (at least in principle) wants to be very interdisciplinary, in terms of getting grants or getting support for your work or getting students interested. I think it seems to work out.

SB: Can you tell me about research projects that you are currently involved with?

DN: Yes. I am involved in three projects. One is the new research on women and science fiction. I have always done it on the side, as I have been finishing up other projects, until I spent last Fall at the Centre. I applied for that fellowship because I wanted to be able to spend a semester getting an application together to do future research. I am going on leave next year and this is what I am going to be working on during my leave. I wanted to get something written up that I could give at conferences and publish to get things started, and also to be in an environment where scholars from all over the world are working on feminist projects, often having to do with literature, narratives, translation, various things that plug into this new work. And I wanted just to be able to bounce ideas in that environment, because I absolutely don't have that environment in the history department, that is something I don't have.

SB: So it is a very supportive environment at the Centre? (Center for Research in Women's Studies and Gender Relations at UBC.)

DN: It is a very supportive environment, and it is an easy environment in which to work. We collaborate and listen to other people's talks and hear about their research, which could be quite different from our own. Not historical necessarily, but raising issues in literatures that I just don't know anything about. So yes, it was very good. That is one project I have been working on since 1995. The first thing I did when I got interested in it was to propose a fourth year senior course called Technology and Gender. I didn't know if it was something that one of my colleagues would want to teach and bring in a different topic. But I thought that at the fourth year level we needed something to follow up on our second year general course on "Technology and Society" that I also teach. So I've been teaching it as a gender course, and to me it was a way of getting into this research and being able to use my preliminary research and explore new things.

So, as I said, there's that kind of interaction between the teaching and the research. I gave my first paper on it a year and a half ago, and out of that paper I decided to apply for the Center. I've got the "womens' science fiction" topic that I worked on while at the Centre, worked up to a certain point. But I've got to put it aside now while I try to finish up a book I'm doing called *Work at the Rough Edge of the World*, which is the last work I intend to do on fisheries on the coast. It's a matter of tying together all my canning communities research and looking at the coast as in some way being made by the canneries, and looking at that literature on boundaries and borders as transition zones, cultural zones, and multiracial active areas and so on, and that's exactly what these are. I am looking at the coastline and the science of it and the geography of it, all the travel literature. I'm looking at these as places for anthropology work, at the kind of magnet these very flexible and seasonal communities actually created. And then the final part looks at the industrial archaeology and heritage that comes out of it and the social memory of it and the way people commemorate these places. So there is a chapter on

Native women called “Memory Work,” which is based on interviews and so on, and there is a chapter called “Paper Work” on Chinese labour contractors and how they went about their business of negotiating and organizing, and there is a chapter on “Artwork”, which is about the poetry and paintings and the work of Emily Carr and others. All those people who bounced off those canneries and depended on them.

SB: So it's a very interdisciplinary work,

DN: Very interdisciplinary, it's very eclectic, but it has as its focus the canning industry and this coast, and it tries to bring in a lot of my empirical research, plus all the new theoretical work on coasts as a metaphor and the kind of life that is there. Also it's about the kind of colonialism that talks about the coast as being the West Coast or the West beyond the West, when in fact for First Nations peoples it's the heart of their territory, and for the Japanese and Chinese migrants into that industry it is part of their Eastward movement. So just talking about how geography gets appropriated in that way, and how we have to turn that around and open it up. So yes, it is very interdisciplinary. And the third project I am going to do...

SB: Lots of work...

DN: Yes, (laughter) I am not looking for things to do. It has also to do with the coast. It is a big study that just got funded. I am working with sociologists here on campus on what is called “The Resilient Coastal Community Project.” It is an interdisciplinary project funded by SSHRC that we put together and got a lot of funding for over three years to study coastal communities and their future, to see how they become resilient in the face of economic change. And my interest is in how history becomes part of that, how the historical background becomes important in this kind of study, even though it is a very contemporary study, and also how, since we are studying social organizations, people plug into them and how that creates social cohesion in these communities. I want to bring in the social memory literature and look at the way historical societies, local archives, local museums, and, for example, belonging to the Museum Association of the Province, plugs people into a specific kind of network that is about their identity in the community. Who dominates that and who gets left out in that social network? First Nations get left out? Are they seen as a negative, or are they seen as a positive?

And I see all that bound up in history, with people and what their future might be as a tourist centre and so on, and it is very much bound up in that. The premise of that study is a sociological one, it comes out of a literature on economic sociology called social capital, and it argues that you can't do a sophisticated analysis of the economy without understanding the social underpinnings. So what we are looking at first is a big data bank of economic indicators and we are saying: “These are the social indicators which can help us to understand”. So instead of just going in and saying that the economy is important, relevant, how can it be fixed, we are saying there are social issues here that we have to look at and those help to explain the economy. Gender will be part of that study. In forest communities and fishing communities and mining communities, how they are seen in different ways in terms of gendered kinds of ways of talking about things. I am interested in things like ecofeminism, these ecofeminist movements in places like

Tofino that normally would be left out of an economic study, but I see this as very much a part of it.

SB: When conducting research do you have a preferred research method?

DN: No, I don't. I absolutely adore archives so I can't imagine doing a study that doesn't involve archival research at some level. But I have always used interviews, and I've always done fieldwork. I like to go and look at the landscape. In my science fiction research there is no particular landscape to look at, so what I've done is I've gone to academic conferences and also big fan conferences on science fiction, to see how the work is handled and who reads it, and how they set it up, and how they want to know more about it, and how they deal with it. You know, the history of it and the creative side of it, and the critical side of it. It is fascinating to see the whole culture that has developed around science fiction. I have been zeroing in on this feminist science fiction, but it involves a big archive because the key person of the study is Judith Merrill, who left her archives. And for twenty-four years now there has been an annual feminist science fiction conference held in Madison, Wisconsin every May. I went to the one that was celebrating its twentieth anniversary. So they had all the feminist science fiction writers there, and Judith Merrill was still alive and she was there, and all the early women who were writing and editing and so on before the second wave of feminism were there as well, so I was very lucky. I haven't been back to one, but I will, I hope, over the next two years, get to go to another one. So for me that is my field work, that is kind of a landscape that I look at.

There is also an annual academic conference on science fiction held every year in Fort Lauderdale. I went last year. That is a conference the people who teach it from universities go to, and science fiction critics, and science fiction writers. They have workshops and they talk about their new work and everybody gets to throw in ideas. Also all the people who review science fiction, publish science fiction, who run science fiction book stores, they all go as well. There is a kind of subculture there of feminists who act in their own way and it's fascinating to watch this. So they're kind of the polar opposite to the big fan conferences that go on. So for me that is fieldwork. I also have a nice chance to do the archival work and to learn about an area that I knew almost nothing about. It's been very good for my teaching because I bring a lot of science fiction into it, into both my general undergraduate course on Technology and to my Technology and Gender course. And particularly science fiction videos, things that students often don't have time on their own to see, they will often watch the whole thing in class and it becomes a device for teaching. So that I don't know if that can be called a research method but I guess it is, a combination of archives, fieldwork and interviewing.

SB: Well, can we go back to your other research with First Nations communities and the fishery? What events if any, led you to conduct research in this area?

DN: I guess I have to back up to the reason why I got interested in studying the salmon canning industry. I started doing that about a year after I came to UBC in 1980. So I started getting interested in about '81, '82, because I was hired to add to their Canadian Western history component, but that wasn't really my research area. My dissertation was

on mining technology in early Ontario. What they wanted was not someone who was particularly trained in Western Canadian history, but someone who had a broader base training, with specific expertise they could bring to it, so they could supervise work and they could develop new courses and so on. So the fact that I worked on resources and the fact that I was doing history of technology was of interest, but the understanding was that I would be willing to teach on Western Canada and I would be willing to supervise research on it, and I would take an interest in it in my own research. So when I came here, I looked around for a project that I could start that seemed to fit in to the kinds of things that I was interested in. I was doing industrial archaeology, which is a study of a historical archaeology, looking at what is on the surface and above the surface, looking at the material culture of industry.

I thought the salmon canneries would be a really interesting study to do. So I got a federal grant to do an industrial archaeology project in which the salmon canneries were a component. I started that work with a colleague at Simon Fraser who is a physical geographer. He is a specialist in air photo reconnaissance, but he also did a lot of work on Native sites from the air. We put in a proposal to the B.C Heritage Foundation which was just opening up an Historical Archaeology research grant. We got the first grant, and what we did was a survey of all the coastal cannery sites. We started out with site-based research and I worked up all the archival data that would go with that. He stopped working on it after a few years. Quite a few students were involved, and I kept working on it. I thought I would just study how technology had had an impact upon the layout of the sites and the buildings and their configuration. I found that I couldn't really study the technology, I needed to study the workforce, I needed to study the business itself, and there just wasn't anything there to understand that with. So I started working on that on my own, starting with the sites and the diffusion of the industry. That's how I got into Native labour and into the whole labour contract system.

I was working in that area in 1990, just before I was about to go on leave, when I got a call from a lawyer for a Native fishing rights case for the Bella Bella. It was a case about something I had never studied, very contemporary: the herring roe and kelp fishery. The Bella Bella (Heiltsuk) were suing the government over commercial licenses. Because I probably had the best grasp of the industry, they asked me. They wanted a background expert report in two months, on the history of Aboriginal involvement in the fishery from 1870 on. They wanted the history of all the regulations and laws concerning the fisheries and the industry that would have affected Native involvement, and the state of the fisheries habitat, and how the history of the fishery, the history of regulation and the history of native involvement, all those played together. So I had to really cram research into this kind of study and it took me outside canning and it took me outside salmon, but mostly I stayed with salmon because that was the core of it. I hadn't really done any research on post World War II and they really needed that, so I worked that up. Well, I was an expert witness in that case and it was really one of those very frustrating cases that went nowhere at the time. But I decided, given the experience of doing that research, and on that testimony and having it ignored, that as an academic I was in a position to continue working on it. I would publish it so that it would help inform the public, and the judges and the lawyers, all sides. So I spent the next three years turning that thirty-five page report into a book.

For my canneries project, I had already done interviews with Native women and

so on, but I had gotten particularly interested in that aspect of the work, since for the Native women, it was a major employment opportunity, but it was also very important culturally. There was just a lot going on and I wanted to see how they interacted and how their work was intergenerational and so on. So both of those things went together, but that's the genesis of *The Tangled Webs* book. It had never been my intention to write a book like that until I had that experience. And I am very glad, I must say, because I know it has had an impact on treaty negotiations, it's had an impact on people's research, it's been very important for First Nations communities (and I wasn't sure how that would go). People in government read it, they know it, and in a way they have to because they have to understand what the particular situation is. It has also opened up other things.

The book I am writing now is quite different, but to me it is kind of wrapping everything up, and it's the way I can say that I really feel that I did something new on the coast. So it took turns that I hadn't expected: I hadn't expected to do something like this coastal resilience study, but one of the things that happens in research is, when you do the research and you publish and so on, you may be ready to move into other areas, but as people catch up with that research and read things, they see you as having expertise in that. They want to be a graduate student working on it with you, or they want to get you involved in a project like this one.

I am very much interested in curiosity driven research. I like doing research that has political implications, and I like dealing with the politics, and I guess that's what I did in *Tangled Webs* and certainly what I am doing in my science fiction project. Because to me that is what is interesting about it, the politics of women being engaged as writers of science fiction. It is a political act. And whether what they write about is political or not is a different matter, but they did write political things, they wrote about environmental politics, they wrote about medical politics before the second wave of feminism. And what is important for me is that it is often very difficult for women to be engaged in what have traditionally been seen as the measures for involvement in science and technology; being a scientist, being an engineer, having your name on a patent, those things which have always been the measures of innovation. So I see that if you are marginalized within fields, then one way of getting involved (it is really a political act) is in critiquing the fields.

Science fiction is often about critiquing, it's about saying, "What are the moral and ethical responsibilities of open ended science, of working at full technological capacity without thinking whether or not it is a responsible or ethical thing to do?" Saying "I just invented it, it is not my responsibility..." You know, Frankenstein's problem, and when women engage in science fiction you have to assume that they are involved in critiquing and predicting and talking about moral dilemmas and so on. I want to see what they actually wrote about. I am particularly interested in looking at the women who were not just science fiction writers, but who also wrote about other things: government reports, non-fiction, or children's stories. A lot of them were engaged in editing, some of them became literary agents for science fiction writers, some of them were anthologists and that has a big role to play in shaping what science fiction is. That is what Judith Merrill did, she became a major anthologist. Anybody who has written science fiction wanted to be in her anthologies. Later feminist writers, who rediscovered her, said it was too bad that she got marginalized, that she stopped writing, she stopped doing important things in science fiction and she started anthologizing instead. I look at

that and say, what she was doing in fact was within the power structure of the system. So the politics of involvement was really important and I think that is what feminist research is about too, looking at these power structures and not just sort of running across them as you go along, but seeing them, making them explicit in the set of assumptions, in the questions that you are testing.

SB: Would you ever consider teaching an English course on feminist science fiction writers?

DN: You mean do it in the actual English Department, or the History Department and trying to make it look like English?

SB: Or maybe having a course in the Women Studies Department that deals specifically with feminist science fiction writing?

DN: Well I am glad you asked me that, because I had never thought of it. Strange isn't it? I guess maybe in part I haven't thought of it because I don't feel that I am fully into the research yet. But of course that would be a natural thing to do, and there probably would be a lot of interest, and it is certainly explicitly interdisciplinary isn't it? And I think that what happens is (I'm saying this as a very important principle for interdisciplinary work in teaching and research) any course that you introduce has to get approval from all departments that might have an interest in that field. And I know that the former Dean was trying to get around that by promoting courses being taught in Women Studies and elsewhere that would give you a chance to teach those courses, trying it for a few years anyway, to see how it would go and to get a chance to work it out. But you would still have to demonstrate expertise and you would still need some credentials for teaching, not just taking a flyer and putting it up... So my answer would be "yes".

SB: Is there anything that you would like to add?

DN: No, no. But thank you for your questions, they were very interesting.