

# INDIANS, LAND, AND IDENTITY IN WASHINGTON

(or, *Why Cross-Border Shop*):  
*A Review Essay*

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*Indians, Fire, and the Land in the Pacific Northwest*

Robert Boyd, editor

Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1999. 313 pp.

Illus., maps. US\$34.95 paper.

*Lusbootseed Culture and the Shamanic Odyssey:*

*An Anchored Radiance*

Jay Miller

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. 184 pp.

Illus., maps. US\$45 cloth.

*Beyond the Reservation:*

*Indians, Settlers, and the Law in Washington Territory, 1853-1889*

Brad Asher

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. 275 pp.

Maps. US\$34.95 cloth.

*Indians in the Making:*

*Ethnic Relations and Indian Identities around Puget Sound*

Alexandra Harmon

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 393 pp.

Illus., maps. US\$40 cloth.

Pardon me if when I want  
to tell the story of my life  
it's the land I talk about.

-Pablo Neruda

**B**ORDER GUARDS, flags, and duty free shops mark the boundary between British Columbia and Washington State, bisecting an area that many people experience as a

“region.” Aboriginal people crossed the 49th parallel long before it was imbued with political significance; fur traders and, later, immigrants did likewise. Today, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents of British Columbia and Washington traverse this boundary with a facility and frequency that often surprises those who live farther from the border. But

the flow of cross-border traffic carries few historians or anthropologists with it. Scholars have taken an isolationist perspective on BC history, distinguishing it from both the Canadian "West" to the east of the Rocky Mountains and the American "Pacific Northwest" to the south. This is unfortunate, for widening our view to locate British Columbia within a larger region raises valuable new perspectives and questions.

Four recent books that deal with Indians (the term chosen by the authors) in what is now Washington State provide a fine opportunity to broaden our historical gaze in just this manner. All of these books examine in some fashion the relationship between Aboriginal people and land. Each work addresses a particular aspect of this relationship, ranging from interactions with the physical landscape, through the more ephemeral sense of attachment to place, to colonial re-definitions of spatial boundaries. Though these studies adopt the international boundary as their own boundary of enquiry – American scholars are no more likely to look north than British Columbian ones are to look south – they address issues of great importance for British Columbia, where current treaty negotiations lend a sense of immediacy to historical questions about land, sovereignty, and identity.

Fire ecology, an often neglected aspect of Aboriginal land management, is comprehensively addressed in Robert Boyd's collection of interdisciplinary essays, *Indians, Fire, and the Land in the Pacific Northwest*. This volume provides both an overview of the development of fire studies and an exploration of "anthropogenic" (human-caused) fire in the Pacific Northwest. Fire was the "primary tool of

indigenous, non-agricultural environmental management" (292), and the authors outline various reasons, methods, and seasons for burning. Aboriginal people burned land to stimulate berry or camas bulb production, to create attractive grazing grounds for game, to aid in defence or warfare, and to facilitate travel. Selective burning was beneficial because it increased bio-diversity, a fact unappreciated by non-Aboriginal ecologists until the mid-twentieth century.

This collection of essays is noteworthy for its inclusion of British Columbia in the "Pacific Northwest." Two of the twelve essays, Nancy Turner's "Time to Burn" and Leslie Main Johnson's "Aboriginal Burning for Vegetation Management in Northwest British Columbia," are about British Columbia. No single author takes a trans-border region as an area of study, though. While several authors discuss how changing boundaries of private property and parks affected burning practices, none considers the impact of international political boundaries on the history of burning patterns. Has the expansion of non-Aboriginal private property in Washington State confined current-day burning practices to reservation lands as it has in northwestern British Columbia, for example? Or have the differing land policies in British Columbia and Washington, which produced numerous, smaller reserves in British Columbia and fewer, larger ones in Washington, had a differential impact on the history of burning?

Besides providing a valuable compendium of material details about Indian fire ecology, *Indians, Fire, and the Land* also hints at the human sensibility towards the land that accompanied these land management

practices. Several essays describe Aboriginal people who mourn the *deterioration* of land from the previously open, manicured spaces maintained by fire, to the lush, overgrown forests of today. Boyd offers the most poignant example of this in his introduction when he recounts anthropologist Jay Miller's experience in 1979, travelling through the Methow Valley in north-central Washington with a group of Methow elders, some of whom had not visited the valley for fifty years. About half way through the valley, one woman started to cry: "When my people lived here, we took good care of all this land. We burned it over every fall to make it like a park. Now it is a jungle" (1). This woman's reaction reveals a great deal about her attachment to the valley, her sense of beauty, and her definition of stewardship. Ironically, the park-like landscapes of what is now southern Vancouver Island, created by similar Aboriginal burning techniques, reminded Captain George Vancouver of England (when he visited in 1790) and may have later influenced the location of Fort Victoria. These are the human features of historical landscape.

Boyd's volume does little more than hint at these intangible issues of attachment to place. This cultural nexus between people and land is at the heart of Jay Miller's *Lushootseed Culture and the Shamanic Odyssey: An Anchored Radiance*. Miller, the same anthropologist who witnessed the striking reaction of the Methow woman in 1979, relies largely on Lushootseed elders to create a "thick description" of the shamanic odyssey – a curing ceremony in which shamans journey to the land of the dead to retrieve lost spirits. Miller conveys a deeply human sense of place in his account of a culture revolving around emotional

and religious connections to land and environment. Land is central because "native religion was mostly about place, position in this world and in the afterworld" (45). Lushootseed communities were spatially aligned along waterways, and places had spiritual and social specificity. Each drainage system had its own style of ceremonial plank for use in the shamanic odyssey (136). Class and rank were linked to the length and specifics (upriver or down) of one's residency (6, 24). Status was enhanced by reaching across landscape to generate and sustain links with spatially distant friends and kin. These links are one manifestation of the anchored radiance in Miller's title: "By using resources locally 'anchored,' a household could add to their regional 'radiance'" (21).

This "anchored radiance" is central to Miller's picture of Lushootseed culture, and it closely resembles a concept described by Richard White: "The permanent villages and seasonal wandering in search of food formed the two poles of the Coast Salish's physical relation to the land. Both were basic" (Boyd 40). Both White and Miller suggest a human relationship to landscape constituted by the tension between local and distant places. It would not be surprising if such characterizations were relevant for Coast Salish people on this side of the border, particularly since many trips to collect food or attend inter-village gatherings were cross-border journeys.

Unfortunately, Miller's vivid account of the dialectic between Lushootseed place and culture radiates from an anchor that is overly static and ahistorical. For Miller, apparent cultural loss is actually "continuity in substitute forms, both traditional and Christian" (1). Thus, the shamanic

odyssey, which has not been performed in 100 years, has not disappeared so much as it has been replaced by a new form serving the same function. In this conception, new practices are vessels for old meanings. It seems doubtful, though, that at least some changes in meaning did not accompany the radical alterations in form. For example, although Miller is undoubtedly correct in stating that "Natives hid cherished beliefs behind conversion" (44), his framework leaves little room for interpreting conversion as anything other than dissimulation. Miller's refreshing inclusion of cross-border material is similarly marked by this ahistorical tendency. He uses Katzie and Nuxalk ethnographies as evidence for Lushootseed culture without any comparative consideration of the distinct colonial histories of these First Nations. Miller's conscientious reluctance to provide specific references in order to preserve his good relations with Lushootseed people (2-3) augments the book's sense of timelessness.

If Miller's book tells us about the spirituality of space, Brad Asher's *Beyond the Reservation: Indians, Settlers, and the Law in Washington Territory, 1853-1889*, tells us about the legalistic policy of place. Asher begins with the insightful premise that scholars have looked for Indians primarily on reservations (because that is where federal policy said they should be), when, in fact, the boundaries of those reservations were exceedingly "porous." This meant that many Indians experienced contact with Euro-American society "beyond the reservation." Asher characterizes two phases of this contact: exclusion and control. Prior to 1870, policy makers attempted to exclude Indians from Euro-American law, society, and space. The extensive

inter-relationships between Whites and Indians rendered this federally sanctioned policy untenable, and local courts subsequently implemented a policy of control. During this period the basis of legal jurisdiction also shifted from race (of the victim or perpetrator) to geography (where the infraction occurred). These changing American notions of place and sovereignty are at the core of Asher's study. Focusing each chapter around individual district court cases, Asher explores changing attitudes towards the law among settlers and (less successfully) among Indians. He examines these attitudes in relation to a host of issues, including territorial law making, liquor sales, formal and popular White legal culture, and Native legal culture.

Although Asher sets out to track historical change in legal culture, like Miller he ultimately fails to convey a clear sense of change over time. Asher's weakness in this regard is more organizational than conceptual. Within each chapter, he alternates too frequently between contextual discussions of policy, evidence from district court records, and theoretical points about the rhetorical and symbolic power of the law. Within the book, he orders the chapters thematically rather than chronologically, which further complicates his argument. The final result is sometimes repetitive and occasionally confusing.

Asher's organizational weakness is a good indication of how writers stand to benefit by casting their scholarly eye north (or south, as the case may be). Absent from Asher's bibliography, for example, is Tina Loo's *Making Law, Order, and Authority in British Columbia* (1994). This omission is striking because Asher's otherwise wide-ranging bibliography includes

references to Blacks in ante-bellum South Carolina and Massachusetts, the Pequots of southern New England, and Creole Louisianans. Loo's work bears remarkable similarities to Asher's. Her focus on the colonial period parallels his territorial one, and, like Asher, she structures her chapters around specific court cases. Yet Loo's book, which is tightly focused around a discussion of laissez-faire liberalism as a historical construct, contains the level of consistent organizational structure that Asher's book lacks. In Loo, Asher might have found a degree of guidance for honing his own central themes.

Ecology, spirituality, and the law are important dimensions of Aboriginal relationships to landscape. While Boyd, Miller, and Asher each focus on one of these dimensions, Alexandra Harmon weaves them together in her study of Indian identity, *Indians in the Making: Ethnic Relations and Indian Identities around Puget Sound*. Harmon identifies the same "porous" reservation boundaries as does Asher, and then she goes on to explore their implications for the less visible human boundaries of identity and race. She interrogates the very category of "Indian" by conceiving of "ethnic and racial distinctions as a process rather than an essence" and provides a "chronicle of change over time in Indianess itself" from the 1830s through the 1970s (3). Harmon argues that White and Indian interaction occurred on a metaphoric bridge that allowed individuals from different cultures to communicate without relinquishing essential identities and without achieving actual understanding. Using ethnographic sources, she skilfully maps the bounds of this bridge, illuminating differing White and Indian conceptions of power, race, treaties, sovereignty, war, and murder.

Careful to avoid setting up a simple Indian-White dichotomy, she also insists upon and demonstrates the "diversity" that flourished at both ends of the contact "bridge."

With her careful attention to legal struggles over land, Harmon demonstrates the shifting nexus between physical relationships to the land and the intangible issues of identity. She shows, for example, how both Whites and Indians tried to manipulate definitions of who was, and who was not, an Indian in order to get land. As mobility and intermarriage complicated White attempts to distinguish between themselves and Indian "others," the struggles to define difference intensified. For the White population, land acquisition and control were central aspects of their self-identification, as were their attempts to define Indians. On these issues of White self-definition, Asher's and Harmon's interests converge.

The tension between local rootedness and regional mobility that is raised by Miller and White also appears in Harmon's argument, where it is placed in the context of colonial relations. Patterns of mobility – some of them age-old, others the result of White economic enterprises – were important elements in the proliferating patchwork of Indian identity. These patterns resemble those in British Columbia, as do the attempts by government and church officials to fix roaming Indians in one place. Although Harmon halts her journey at the border, Aboriginal people did no such thing. Department of Indian Affairs records for British Columbia include numerous references to Washington Indians in British Columbia working in canneries or proselytizing the Shaker religion, just as various American sources refer repeatedly to "northern," or BC, Indians

in the hop fields and on the reservations. These cross-border relations and migrations have historical and contemporary implications that remain largely unexplored.

Resource management, spiritualism, law, mobility, and identity are all facets of the complex historical relationship between Aboriginal people and

landscape. This is as true for British Columbia as it is for Washington. The studies by Boyd, Miller, Asher, and Harmon offer valuable counterpoints and comparisons for those interested in British Columbia. Scholars stand to gain fresh insights and new viewpoints if they join the cross-border flow.