

FORUM: ON NOT GOING ON A FIELD TRIP

PRESENCE, ABSENCE, AND THE WRITING OF BC HISTORY

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HOW CAN WE KNOW about a time in which we did not live? Historical methodology places enormous weight on the ability of primary documents – traditionally defined as sources written at the time of the events they describe, and now revised to encompass, if tentatively, spoken or created evidence – to speak on behalf of the past in the present. Historians collect documents in archives, catalogue them in bibliographies, and reference then in precise footnotes that baffle our students. Increasingly, we do so with a critical eye honed by poststructuralist insight into the necessarily partial and fragmented character of all knowledge.¹ Such rethinking helps us deal with what is transmitted by documents and also prompts us to consider what documents fail to convey. However much any document tells us, there is more that it does not tell us. There is always more that is unspoken than is spoken, more unwritten than written. Not going on a field trip alerts me to that unwritten, unspoken, and always troubling part of the British Columbian past.

As is the way with all absences, there is much to my absence on the field trip organized by *BC Studies* in the spring of 2001. There was, obviously, my presence elsewhere. I live and work in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Writing BC history from elsewhere is not new to me. I was born and raised in Vancouver but came to the history of colonial British Columbia while living and studying in Toronto. The work that would eventually become *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University

¹ This is best demonstrated by the authors in Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Michinson, eds., *On the Case: Explorations in Social History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). My phrasing of this predicament was suggested in part by a question asked by Karen Standworth at a Vancouver conference in the fall of 1998, the name of which escapes me.

of Toronto Press, 2001) was initially inspired not by local experience but by a rich international literature on gender and colonialism. That through reading about imperialism elsewhere I came to see imperialism where I was is a suggestive comment on the convenient erasure of dispossession settler consciousness.

The completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1886 changed much in British Columbia. That year, more than 1871 – the year British Columbia entered Canadian Confederation – signals a major change in prevailing patterns of British Columbia’s social history. Travel suggests how. Before 1886, it was unusual for a non-Aboriginal person to make the journey from Red River “overland.” Those who did encountered privation and courted publicity, publishing travelogues that documented how they sometimes ate their horses around Kamloops.² What Cole Harris calls the “struggle with distance” changed in 1886,³ and it has changed further since then, although access and travel remain uneven throughout much of British Columbia and Western Canada. It is relatively easy to get from Winnipeg to Vancouver, even if it is still difficult to get from Bella Coola to Vancouver.

The difficulty of getting from here to there when “there” is British Columbia suggests some of the problems and possibilities of scholarship about the margins. That British Columbia teetered, and in some important ways continues to teeter, at the edge of European territorial control has had immense implications for what we know and don’t know about the place. Daniel Clayton demonstrates how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century exploration and trade pulled Vancouver Island into the ambit of European imagining.⁴ The incorporation of Aboriginal space into European knowledge and, ultimately, territorial control guaranteed that the lands that would be rebaptized as Vancouver Island and British Columbia would be assigned a certain set of images, ideas, and discourses. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* contains the germinal insight that such stock knowledge functioned to inform and serve the centre rather than to understand

² See, for instance, Joanne Leduc, ed., Thomas McMicking, *Overland from Canada to British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1981); Walter B. Cheadle, *Cheadle’s Journal of Trip across Canada, 1862–1863* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1971); George M. Grant, *Ocean to Ocean: Sandford Fleming’s Expedition through Canada in 1872* (Toronto: James Campbell and Son, 1873).

³ See his *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), chap. 6.

⁴ Daniel W. Clayton, *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).

the various peripheries about which, putatively, it spoke.⁵ In the case of British Columbia, this did not take much. Few general texts on the nineteenth-century world, or even the British Empire, will find us in the index, and those that do usually enumerate British Columbia as one of a confusing array of less than significant colonies. British Columbia's entry into Confederation shifted but did not resolve this dynamic: the Pacific province now sits uneasily in national surveys and collections. It is hard to see margins from anywhere *but* margins. It is no accident that scholars of British Columbia usually have lived in its borders, at least for a time: how else would we have found the place?

Seeing from the margins lets us see new places and, by necessary implication, lets us see in new ways. People who sit at any number of different margins – gendered, sexualized, racialized, cultural, class, or geographical (and also disciplinary) – have regularly reminded us that the world looks different when viewed from an edge.⁶ Taking the divergent histories and experiences of non-metropolitan places seriously leads to more than the cursory rejigging of well established narratives of national and super-national development that, too often of late, are being peddled as “transnational” scholarship. It should, as historian of imperial Britain Antoinette Burton is arguing, lead us to unpack the intimate wedding of historical scholarship to the nation-state. It is not coincidental that “the burden of representing fragmentation, diaspora, and community-making as operations of nation-building would seem to have fallen disproportionately on ex-colonies and postcolonial nations.”⁷ We need to use our knowledge of margins not simply to complicate enduring visions of sovereign, self-perpetuating, and territorially bounded nation-states, but also to conceive of a history that better accounts for entangled relationship between empires, nations, and colonies and the complicated means by which these different bodies are constituted, sustained, and challenged.

But it was the political economy of family rather than the political economy of transportation or the politics of historical knowledge production that dictated my absence from that particular field trip. I

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1975).

⁶ See, on this, Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); and Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2000).

⁷ Antoinette Burton, “Who Needs the Nation? Interrogating ‘British’ History,” reprinted in *Cultures of Empire: A Reader*, ed. Catherine Hall (Routledge: London, 2000), 145.

have a young daughter, Nell Ives Perry, and for that reason keep my travel as minimal as possible. Not going on field trips is one of the small ways that I try to balance family and work. The very notion that these are separate areas is, of course, an artefact of industrialization. The artifice of the division between private and public, family and work, has been made visible by the feminist revolution of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries – a revolution that has drawn attention to the historical processes by which such divisions were constructed and lived, often to the special disadvantage of women.

My absence from the field trip was thus my presence elsewhere; namely, in the physical space of Winnipeg and the social space of family. It was given shape by a variety of historical memories, most notably of its antecedent, the *BC Studies* Editorial Board Field Trip of 1999. I was present on that field trip and recall it with some regularity. We travelled the Fraser Canyon in two aging station wagons. It was not unlike the road trips of my BC childhood: we ate French fries, pie, and the cuisine of commercialized Chinese diaspora; visited people; and slept in vaguely seedy hotels. With the help of Cole Harris and Terry Aleck, we tied place to history: the sloped depressions that marked the one-time presence of Nlaka7pamux pit-houses, the rocky ruts created by Chinese placer miners, the remains of churches built by Oblate missionaries.

Road trips have a special cultural purchase throughout western Canada. The *BC Studies* field trip of 1999 – and, I suspect, this last one, although my absence ensures that I will never really know – turned that cultural form in on itself. Postcolonial scholarship reminds us that tourism is more about the travellers than it is about those Karen Dubinsky wryly refers to as “travelees.”⁸ My experience on this road trip was shaped by a variety of factors, most of all the fact that I was eight months pregnant. The journey was conditioned by my wariness for my large self and my sense – now confirmed by two and half years of motherhood – that my days as a frequent traveller were numbered.

The trip was also conditioned by those with whom I shared the station wagons. Jill Ker Conway’s memoirs of practising as a historian

⁸ See her “Vacations in the ‘Contact Zone’: Race, Gender, and the Traveller at Niagara Falls,” in *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, ed. Ruth Road Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1998). On British Columbia, see Nancy Pagh, “Imagining Native Women: Feminine Discourse and Four Women Travelling the Northwest Coast,” in *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women’s History*, ed. Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).

in Canada in the 1960s remind us how the smallness and relative concentration of Canada's settler society has produced a social proximity that is in many ways anomalous within modernity. Ker Conway's husband is from the heart of middle-class, White Vancouver, and she speaks of that social milieu with the clarity of vision possessed by intimate observers. Canadians, she notices, "had a habitation, a home, a community." Conway links this rootedness to the deeply regional character of Canadian life. "The regional scale of the country," she concludes, "removed much of the anonymity of modern life."⁹ Circles indeed always overlap within regions. They did in those station wagons that were filled with people I knew foremost as colleagues but secondarily as people I once baby-sat for, people who were friends with my high school teacher, and people who grew up around the corner from my mother.

My absence from the field trip of 2001 spoke loudly and in a number of voices. So, too, do the absences that so often appear in the historiography of British Columbia. The list of things we know about is short in comparison to the list of things we do not know about. We do not know very much, for instance, about the 1870s, or, indeed, about the twentieth century as a whole. The most remarkable pattern of silence probably concerns Aboriginal peoples. Notwithstanding the remarkable outpouring of publications about First Nations people in British Columbia in the last two decades – a shift that is evident in the pages *BC Studies* – our knowledge of their place in British Columbia's history remains tellingly fragmented and episodic.

This absence is not accidental. History developed as a handmaiden to the nation-state in the last one-third of the nineteenth century, and it wore its faith in the written word proudly. Those who wrote possessed capital-H history, and those who did not were evicted into the netherworld of the mythic – into what Anne McClintock calls "anachronistic space."¹⁰ The linked equation between literacy, civilization, and history was normalized by the mid-twentieth century but needed to be explained in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. In 1894, Alexander Begg took care to explain how history began in British Columbia once Europeans arrived and started to write:

Of the pre-historic period, that is, prior to the arrival of Captain James Cook, on the north-west coast of America, little need be said.

⁹ Jill Ker Conway, *True North: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 173.

¹⁰ See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Quest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

The fact, however, is well established that when Captain Cook and other early navigators visited the shores of the Pacific in this latitude, a very large population of aborigines existed on the coast. Alexander Mackenzie, in his expeditions across the unexplored portion of the North American continent to the Pacific, in 1793, also found along his route a numerous population in the interior. But, like their brethren on the coast, they did not possess any written records. Their traditions were mythical; and, though carved emblematically on totems of enduring cedar in their villages along the seaboard, these emblems have not been deciphered so as to throw any light on the origins of the native tribes.¹¹

Begg wields the connections between history, literacy, and civilization self-consciously and with care. He does not dispute the fact of Aboriginal possession – Begg knows that there was “a very large population of aborigines” on the coast and inland. Nor does he deny the existence of Aboriginal ways of documenting the past – he acknowledges that coastal traditions were “carved emblematically on totems of enduring cedar.” Indeed, Begg admits that an analysis based on written records necessarily privileges what we now call post-contact history – he called his book *A History of British Columbia from Its Earliest Discovery to the Present Time*, not *A History of British Columbia*, let alone *The History of British Columbia*.

Begg was neither thoughtless nor cavalier. He acknowledges Aboriginal presence, Aboriginal methods of historical communication, and the partiality of Western, capital H-history. He simply does not see the equation of history with literacy and the concomitant expulsion of non-writing peoples from temporality and civilization as a problem. While we would be hard pressed to find a historian of British Columbia who agreed with Begg on this point, we would be equally hard pressed to disaggregate historical practice from the written document. The practice of ethnohistory has shown us some practical alternatives: scholars like Wendy Wickwire demonstrate the immense utility of the spoken record, while Julie Cruikshank alerts us to the importance of narrative in both written and oral sources.¹²

¹¹ Alexander Begg, *History of British Columbia from Its Earliest Discovery to the Present Time* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972 [1894]), preface.

¹² Wendy Wickwire, “To See Ourselves as the Other’s Other: Nlaka’pamux Contact Narratives,” *Canadian Historical Review* 75, 1 (1994): 1–20; Julie Cruikshank, “Images of Society in Klondike Gold Rush Narratives: Skookum Jim and the Discovery of Gold,” *Ethnohistory* 39, 1 (Winter 1992): 20–41.

But the writing of history in British Columbia remains deeply tied to the written record, leaving silences all round.

The incongruity between mainstream historical methodology and oral cultures hints at some other limits to the scholarly practice of historians who, like myself, dwell almost exclusively with records written in English. Timothy Stanley's reading of the Chinese "public sphere" in mid-twentieth-century Vancouver – a public sphere articulated in large part in the Cantonese-language press – suggests how historians' failure to adequately scrutinize non-English sources ensures that our sights are forever fixed on the majority.¹³ Gerry Friesen's meditation on the relationship between communication, technology, and citizenship hints at how print culture could be both hegemonic and partial for working-class and non-urban people well into the twentieth century.¹⁴ Three decades of sustained inquiry into Canadian women's history have challenged assumptions about the unknowability of the female past, but anyone who has culled archives looking for sources written by women knows that they are almost always scarce in comparison to those authored by men. There is, indeed, more not written than written.

The problem of historical absence prompts no simple solutions. It is easy to trumpet oral sources, but there are obvious limits to their interpretive possibilities, not least of which is people's understandable reticence to serve as literal subjects of history. It is equally easy to call for scholarly self-reflexivity, but acknowledging the limits of our intellectual practice does not necessarily lead us beyond Begg's awareness of the partiality of his historical vision. The problem of historical absences is generated by the inevitable gap between past and present and the unevenness that flows from systemic inequality and competing modes of experiencing and interpreting the world.¹⁵ These sorts of problems are solved by revolutions, not by shifts in scholarly technique. Finding new sources, new ways of reading old sources, and remaining conscious and critical of the extent to which our practice is created by, and in turn creates, Western knowledge will help keep the problem of absence at bay, but it will not and cannot resolve it.

Such is my reading of Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument. In his recent and disarming *Provincializing Europe: Post-colonial Thought and*

¹³ Timothy Stanley, "Schooling, White Supremacy, and the Formation of a Chinese Merchant Public in British Columbia," in *Making Western Canada: Essays on European Colonization and Settlement*, ed. Catherine Cavanaugh and Jeremy Mouat (Toronto: Garamond, 1996).

Historical Difference Chakrabarty convincingly argues that it is impossible to disaggregate history – defined as “a developmental process in which that which is possible becomes actual by tending to a future that is singular”¹⁶ – from the politics of Western supremacy that produced it as a way of understanding and ordering human society. Chakrabarty’s argument here is less pessimistic than it might initially appear. His demand for the “provincialization” of European thought, he offers in conclusion, is made in “an anticolonial spirit of gratitude” that recognizes the simultaneous utility and limits of historical thought.¹⁷ Noting the salient limits of historical practice – the practical means by which we produce knowledge of the past – and pushing at them does not preclude us from seeing and utilizing its possibilities.

Between 1862 and 1866, Fitzgerald McCleery, a settler on the North Arm of the Fraser River, recorded his days in a small “pocket diary” that is remarkable only for its existence. McCleery’s enthusiasm for diary keeping waned somewhat over those four years, and his entries were never more than economical. The date 7 August 1865 was remembered thus: “Morning wet. Jack, the Indian, and I working at hay up the river. High tides.”¹⁸ This diary is an important source for historians for the information it offers and, in a less literal way, for the way that it reminds us how much has been unrecorded. We know that more occurred on that August day than McCleery wrote down. There was more to his life than weather, tides, and haying with a man who McCleery assumed to be defined by his status as “the Indian.” There is something to be said about not going on a field trip, and something needs to be said about the history that remains, silent, on the quiet edges of what is written.

¹⁴ Gerald Friesen, *Citizens and Nation: An Essay on History, Communication, and Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Some of these competing ways of interpreting time and space are touched on in Michael E. Harkin’s “Sacred Places, Scarred Spaces,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 15, 1 (Spring 2000): 49–70.

¹⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 249.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁸ Fitzgerald McCleery, *Diary, 1862–1866*, (Vancouver, Vancouver City Archives, 1940), 89.

FORUM (CONTINUED)

ABSENCE, MEMORY, AND GEOGRAPHY

DANIEL CLAYTON

A DIRTY ORANGE MIST hangs over the Fraser Valley but has cleared by the time I saunter into Hope. Now what are these geographers doing outside the neat museum at Yale (and in 1980s cagoules), and why is there no picture of the bar at the Lytton Hotel? Then, as I venture north and east, along trails to Big Bar Creek and to the Slokan Valley, it dawns on me that these pictures from my past are distant and jumbled. The precise circumstances of their creation now escape me. My eye wallows in distant memories. And so it is that I mark my absence from your *BC Studies* junket into the southern Interior: in a dingy Scottish lecture theatre, with a box of slides labelled “BC,” hoping that I will recognise what I see and have seen many times before.

Let me try to salvage something from this situation by writing to you from this position of absence – from my altered circumstances here as someone who studies British Columbia from afar and is now compelled to think about the region in more roundabout ways. Let me turn to a set of concerns that I have about a paper I have been working on entitled “The British Columbian Discourse of the Royal Geographical Society,” which considers a number of pieces about British Columbia that were published in the society’s journal in the mid-nineteenth century. You know these pieces: W.C. Grant’s and James Douglas’s descriptions of Vancouver Island, Richard Mayne’s and Matthew Begbie’s journeys into the Interior, and so on. This paper connects with a recent range of work on geography’s historical links with empire, and I want to explain why it is a piece that I should write but don’t entirely like because of what it does with British Columbia.

Over the last ten years there has been a range of work on the ways in which Western disciplines and learned societies were implicated in Empire.¹ Much of this work focuses on Africa and Asia, which were the hotbeds of nineteenth-century imperial exertion, and where the “epistemic violence” of empire (or intrinsic links between power, knowledge, and geography) and imperial ambitions of European post-Enlightenment thought supposedly come to the fore. In a dazzling essay on the “Africanist discourse” of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) (founded in 1840), for instance, Clive Barnett tries to show how “the actual conditions of cross-cultural contact upon which the production of nineteenth-century geographical knowledge depended are retrospectively rewritten [for metropolitan audiences] to present European subjects as the singular sources of meaning.” He argues that, while Europeans had a practical dependence on Aboriginal guides and information, Aboriginal knowledge is not accorded any epistemological value. Other – that is, African – knowledge is configured “as the confusion and noise against which European science takes shape and secures its authority.”²

All good stuff. Barnett and others are enriching our critical understanding of how Africa, especially, became a primeval space of European fantasy and scrutiny, and why it is impossible to extricate the emergence of the modern discipline of geography from the history of imperialism. However, few geographers working on what Felix Driver has dubbed “geography’s empire”³ are doing much with settler colonies like British Columbia, where the types of knowledges that were filtered through the RGS were not produced solely by Europeans and were not forged simply in the name of geography, science, or reason. British Columbia became slotted into a metropolitan-imperial-scientific-geographical field of vision, but the fact that geographical knowledge was produced by “colonials” such as Douglas

¹ For surveys of the ways in which geographical discourses and practices were implicated in empire, see Daniel Clayton, “Critical Imperial and Colonial Geographies,” in *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, ed. Kay Anderson, Mona Domosh, Steve Pile, and Nigel Thrift (London: Sage, 2002), 531–57; and Daniel Clayton, “Colonialism’s Cultural Geographies,” in *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, ed. James S. Duncan, Nuala Johnson, and Richard Schein (Oxford: Blackwell, in press).

² Clive Barnett, “Impure and Wordly Geography: The Africanist Discourse of the Royal Geographical Society, 1831–73” *Transactions, Institute British-Geographers* n.s. 23, 2 (1998), 239–52 (quotation at 244–45). On Asia and the tropical world, see David N. Livingstone, “Tropical Hermeneutics and the Climatic Imagination,” Hettner Lectures, 5 (Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg, 2002), 43–75.

³ See Felix Driver, “Geography’s Empire: Histories of Geographical Knowledge,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 (1992): 23–40.

and Begbie, as well as by British explorers and surveyors who came and went, considerably confuses the picture of epistemic violence that Barnett paints. Settler colonies like British Columbia, and imperial frontiers and dependent colonial territories in Africa and Asia, obviously did not have the same place in the imperial order of things, and the knowledges that came from these different domains were used for different metropolitan ends.

The paper I am working on tries to do three things. First, it reflects on Driver's useful point that the RGS was less a centre of imperial calculation than an unwieldy information exchange "in which different kinds of knowledge were accommodated without necessarily being reconciled."⁴ Like Driver, I think that we need to be wary of the postcolonial tendency to represent imperial centres, and their institutions and networks of knowledge production, as all-seeing and all-knowing spaces of appropriation. We need to attend instead to the often precarious (if always in some way hierarchical) negotiation of power, meaning, and truth in the diverse spaces within which knowledge was created and circulated (the field, the study, the lecture hall, the museum, and so forth). Second, I attempt to put British Columbia (back) on the RGS map and identify the specific ways in which this fledgling colonial space came under the society's spotlight. I explore how mid nineteenth-century practices of geographical reconnaissance (travel writing, landscape description, surveying, map-making, and the compilation of resource inventories) worked to make British Columbia available and amenable to White settlement and colonial administration. And third – and here's the main burden of the present piece – I try to use "the BC example" to point up some pitfalls in recent geographical scholarship on empire and to think about the imbrications of "local" scholarship and "international" theory. The remainder of this short piece pursues this third issue.

The pitfalls I have in mind stem from Edward Said's hugely influential critique of Orientalism. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) "opened the floodgates of postcolonial criticism," Gyan Prakash recounts, "by its insistent undoing of oppositions between the Orient and the Occident, Western knowledge and Western power, scholarly objectivity and wordly motives ... and so on."⁵ Said exposed the myriad ways in which scholarship and power infiltrate one another. Yet, as

⁴ Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford, UK/Malden, USA: Blackwell, 2001), 21.

⁵ Gyan Prakash, "Orientalism Now," *History and Theory* 34, 3 (1995), 199–212 (quotation at 201).

Robert Young notes, Said's work has also encouraged a lack of historical-geographical specificity in postcolonial studies. For, if Orientalist discourse – and colonial discourse more generally – “is a form of Western fantasy that can say nothing about actuality [as many read Said], while at the same time its determining cultural pressure means that those in the West cannot but use it, then any obligation to address the reality of the historical conditions of colonialism can be safely discarded.”⁶ Among other things, Jane Jacobs observes, much postcolonial scholarship tends to re-inscribe the authority of the Western events, agents, texts, and discourses that it ostensibly seeks to question, both by focusing too exclusively on the White/Western historical record and by exaggerating the power of Western representations of foreign lands and peoples.⁷ A postcolonial politics of location that is premised on the courtesy of listening to the Other and grappling with the inter-subjective nature of colonial encounters is frequently overridden (overruled?) by an anodyne metropolitan-intellectual politics of not speaking for the Other and using the colonial world to deconstruct the West.

Such are some of the postcolonial pitfalls in recent critiques of geography's empire. Geographers are developing a richly contextual and critical historiography of their discipline that is attuned to concrete issues of place and difference and that is animated by the interplay of knowledge and power. But this new historiography takes the European-imperial arena as its prime historical context and the discipline's Eurocentric underpinnings, along with contemporary forms of colonial nostalgia within the West, as its principal critical referent. This body of work is teaching us a tremendous amount about what empire meant to Europeans and about how Europe's imperial mission was seen through the geographical lenses of cartography, environmental determinism, and geo-political theory. However, this type of geographical research displays a shaky sense of the non-European colonial contexts and indigenous geographical practices over which geography's empire ranged. Geographers are teaching us a good deal about how geographical information was gathered from afar, shipped home, and presented to metropolitan audiences as information about the Other; but they are teaching us much less about the peoples and places that Europeans encountered and their

⁶ Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 160.

⁷ Jane M. Jacobs, “Touching Pasts,” *Antipode* 33, 4 (2001): 730–34.

impact on what was seen and recorded. Barnett's essay on the RGS illustrates these tendencies well. He is less interested in how and why Aboriginal people worked as guides and informants than in the denigration of Aboriginal ways of knowing in European geographical science. In all, we have a literature that is ultimately more concerned with the tentacles of empire and the power of European representations of the Other than it is with the messy pragmatics of colonial contact.

Geographers are recycling one of the main problems with the area of inquiry – postcolonial studies – that Said helped to shape: its cultivation of “the margin” as a privileged discursive site of metropolitan criticism and longing. In recent years, as Kalpana Sheshardi-Crooks points out, “the margin,” conceived as the space of the Other, has become “an exotic new frontier” – a space that must be theorized and tamed and that is being used to secure academic privileges in the West.⁸ There has been an explosion of interest in questions of marginality, and the margin is often treated as a therapeutic space where critics can put a price on the epistemological malaise that inheres in modernity (the inherent links between knowledge and power being seen as the main symptom of malaise).

The essay I am working on uses the RGS to consider British Columbia's marginal and fleeting place in the British imperial imagination and to consider how Britain was viewed from the colonies. Let me highlight two sets of issues that come into view. First, it seems to me that many scholars with postcolonial sympathies (including geographers) do not historicize or contextualize colonialism carefully enough. Crucial differences between settler colonialism and other forms of colonialism are sometimes not properly elicited, and the specificities of different colonial projects are sometimes blurred. Comparative work on colonial encounters remains at the cutting edge of attempts to generalize about the nature or logic of colonialism, and the generalizations about colonialism's cultural binaries and ambivalences advanced by postcolonial scholars are powerful and attractive theories. But I agree with Nicholas Thomas that the bright lights of postcolonial theory should not blind us to the need to localize our understanding of European overseas expansion and to treat colonialism as “a practically mediated relationship” rather than as a uniform or coherent imposition.⁹ We

⁸ Kalpana Sheshardi-Crooks, “At the Margins of Postcolonial Studies,” *Ariel* 26, 3 (1995): 45–71 (quotation at 51).

⁹ Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 2–4.

should remind ourselves that settler colonialism was premised upon the displacement and dispossession (and, to a point, disappearance and elimination) of indigenous peoples, whereas other forms of colonialism hinged more directly on the colonizer's struggle to survive in alien surroundings and the need to put the colonized to work. In settler-colonial spaces like British Columbia, the determinate mode of colonial articulation was between the colonizer and the land, whereas colonialism in large parts of Africa and Asia turned around the relationships that small groups of colonizers could make with large and threatening Aboriginal populations.¹⁰ If we want to take the heterogeneity of colonialism seriously, then we need to distinguish between the different modes of knowledge-production that were bound up with settler-colonial and dependent-colonial projects.

Second, and following on from this, it is important to think about a particular aspect of this question of the specificity of British colonialism in British Columbia: namely, what our empirical materials tell us about the affective relations between centres and margins of power. It strikes me that colonial agents like Douglas and Begbie viewed "Britain" and "empire" as powerful yet rickety backdrops to colonization. These figures were undoubtedly operating within empire's discursive regimes (we might stress that they could not escape them), but such regimes were never robust enough to enframe everything they wrote. The structure of information circulation in the British Empire was such that colonists and colonial officials living at a great remove from the imperial centre were left with a good deal of leeway to toy with images of empire, adapt imperial directives as they saw fit, and create colonial homes that did not square with imperial models of affiliation, loyalty, and dependence.¹¹ Information travelled slowly and circuitously, and, as the conservative philosopher Edmund Burke was at pains to show at the end of the late eighteenth century, the distance between Britain and its scattered colonial possessions had an immense bearing on the "locational attachments" that he deemed to be the fount of political societies and an ethical British Empire.¹²

¹⁰ These issues are handled brilliantly by Patrick Wolfe in his *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999).

¹¹ For a deft overview of how this geography affected the British Colonial Office during the nineteenth century, see Peter Burroughs, "Imperial institutions and the government of empire," in *The Oxford history of the British Empire*, vol. 3: *The Nineteenth Century*, ed. A. N. Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170-97.

¹² See, particularly, Burke's "Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debt" (1785), in *The Portable Edmund Burke*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), 378-87. See also Uday

It is possible to reconfigure the politics of information exchange between British Columbia and the RGS (and, by extension, British Columbia and the Colonial Office) in such a way that the epistemological integrity of “BC” knowledge is upheld, and new stories about the creation and destruction of locational attachments in British Columbia emerge. It is possible to show, and important to argue, that imperial margins like British Columbia do not simply serve and consolidate the centre, however critically we construe that centre. Institutions such as the RGS were not merely spaces of appropriation, and colonial places have histories and geographies that exceed what the centre made of them in administrative and historiographic terms. It is by attending to these signs of colonial excess that we might start to reposition an understanding of what metropole and colony meant to each other, and confound the equation of the margin(al) with the local, the particular, and the subsidiary – and of the centre with the global, the universal, and the superordinate.¹³ I am interested in how imperial discourses were bent and appropriated from colonial vantage points, and how colonial knowledges and agendas insinuated themselves into imperial master-narratives of progress and possession. How, to borrow Alan Lester’s elegant formulation, were imperial discourses shaped “by their differentiated material positions and programmes in the colonies” – through the competing agendas of explorers, settlers, colonial officials, and so on – and their different ties with the centre and other colonial spaces?¹⁴

We can read the “BC pages” of the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* outside in, as it were. Writers such as Douglas, Mayne, and Downie deployed many of the rhetorical tropes that empire put at their disposal. They charted colonial prospects. Their narratives were written around the idea of the security of the state, which many postcolonial thinkers see as a generic trait of colonialist historiography.¹⁵ And they sought to capture the physicality of movement and

Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study of Nineteenth-century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 132–43.

¹³ This sort of message lies at the heart of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), which deals with India. See, especially, 43–46, 83–88, 249–55.

¹⁴ Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-century South Africa and Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 7.

¹⁵ This claim has been registered no more clearly and forcefully than by the historian Ranajit Guha over his long career as doyen of the subaltern school of Indian historiography. See, especially, his *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

interaction in colonial quarters and, thus, fed imperial ideals of manly heroism and perseverance.¹⁶ Yet they also worked in ways that did not simply revert back to the centre and that cannot simply be mapped on to some metropolitan-rhetorical template that was freely transported around the world. Many of these BC reports were not written specifically for the RGS, and the reports that the RGS did publish are marked by an economy of silence and imperial idealism. We can find these authors holding back information that they perhaps thought the RGS (and the Colonial Office and Admiralty) should not discover or would not find interesting.¹⁷ We can also find them using rhetorical flourishes that betray idealized (rarefied is perhaps a better word) notions of Britain and what empire stood for. They encapsulated Britishness with images of social order, the English landscape, and the rule of law that, in some senses, made British history stand still (or at least repositioned and domesticated it from afar). In other words, we can now say that their writing effectively gave colonial agents a discursive stake in the negotiation of distinctions between empire and colony, and home and away.¹⁸

These lines of argument are wrapped up with my position of absence. The paper seeks to bring British Columbia and empire into a more two-way analytical field than the ones that many students of geography's empire set up. Furthermore, and to borrow Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan's "diasporic" formulation, the paper brings "the imperatives of an earlier 'elsewhere'" (my BC time) into "an active and critical relationship with the cultural politics of one's present home."¹⁹ My concern with the *mutual constitution* of centres and peripheries of power is no doubt inflected by the relationship between my place here and work there. I am drawn to a style of geographical research that seeks to decentre the idea that modernity and the West are now everywhere and everywhere the same. But, like many other students of empire, I am becoming weary of such routinized

¹⁶ For a provocative foray into the spatiality of this rhetorical trope, see Derek Gregory, "Cultures of Travel and Spatial Formations of Knowledge," *Erdkunde* 54 (2000): 297-309.

¹⁷ Such differences, or discrepancies, are most evident in the case of Douglas and Begbie, whose RGS reports can be compared with a plethora of other reports that they produced for different institutions and audiences.

¹⁸ Douglas, for instance, who had spent most of his life in North America, expressed views about moral order, paternalism, and the pastoralism of the English landscape that were out of sync with the realities of a rapidly industrializing mother country and a changing empire. See, particularly, his diary of his trip to Europe following his retirement as colonial governor (James Douglas, Private Papers, BCARS, B/20-40).

¹⁹ Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), xiii.

deconstruction of the West on behalf of “the rest” and wary of the critical objectives of “an academic Center bent on decentring.”²⁰ Postcolonial scholarship that decentres and deconstructs the West has become a highly marketable and motile critical product – an international product, a certain emblem of globalization. Nevertheless, I have been suggesting that it is also important to attend to the diverse ways in which modernity and colonialism became grounded in different colonial spaces. We need to weigh up precisely how imperial frames of meaning and reference (grand ideas of capital, the state, science, reason, and so on), and colonial idioms, produced, inflected and sustained one another and the material relationships between centres and margins of power.

Theorists such as Gyan Prakash have argued this last point brilliantly. Postcolonial subjects must lay claim to modernity by questioning the universality of Western models of reason, truth, and the human subject, but they should also acknowledge that “neat oppositions [colonialism’s binaries] exist side by side with the history of their untidy complicities and intermixtures.”²¹ Postcolonial critics must question both the Western categories of thought that they use to study the colonial world (particularly the universals of equality, justice, and democracy enshrined in post-Enlightenment thought) and the postcolonial search for national and cultural origins and ways of knowing that are uncontaminated by the experience of colonization. Writing about India, Prakash questions “the comfortable make-believe” that there exists a critical position outside of the historical configurations of colonial modernity – a position from which a postcolonial future or anti-colonial critique will arise – and the same caution applies to postcolonial historical work in ex-settler colonies where the colonizers never returned home. Prakash call this an “interstitial” perspective on colonialism: one that necessarily ranges between places, histories, disciplines, and different ways of knowing, one that returns us to Burke’s locational attachments and how we might now see them “in the knowledge of” colonialism. An “interstitial” postcolonial criticism is concerned with both the universal/systemic features of colonialism and the differentiated qualities of colonial formations. And Prakash proclaims that it

²⁰ The quotation is from James A. Boon, *Verging on Extra-vagance: Anthropology, History, Religion, Literature, Arts ... Showbiz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 199, who looks at this problem in relation to the discipline of anthropology.

²¹ Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 234.

acknowledges that “its own critical apparatus does not enjoy a panoptic distance from colonial history but exists as an aftermath, as an after” – as an aftermath – and “inhabits the structures of Western domination that it seeks to undo.”²²

Yet this is obviously an idealized model of what a two-way postcolonial criticism might look like, not least because theorists like Prakash work more or less unwittingly out of particular colonial histories. India’s colonial experience looms large in much postcolonial theory, and North America gets comparatively short shrift. And, hence, I would like to raise another worry about my interest in British Columbia and the RGS; namely, that my paper is too wrapped up with issues that concern geographers over here and postcolonial theorists working in a more international theoretical space, and not sufficiently concerned with issues that might concern you. Am I unwittingly appropriating an aspect of BC history for disciplinary/postcolonial ends rather than for British Columbian ends? Is it right and good to wrench BC history and geography out of place in the ways I have sketched?

Let me come clean about this worry. I became aware of my distance from British Columbia, and worry about it, because the academic politics of geographical inquiry in this country marginalize issues that animate the pages of a journal like *BC Studies* and the ways in which they are tackled. The analysis of colonialism has become very trendy over here, and this piece of mine on the RGS is aimed at a mainstream – that is, “international”; that is, British or American – geography journal, largely because our national system of research accreditation proclaims that work of the highest order should be published in “international” outlets. The implication (if not assumption) here is that there is an identifiable community of “international geographers” with discernible international research interests and that such geographers prize one another’s work and interests over other styles and objects of inquiry.²³ Publications in *BC Studies* count for little in this system because the journal does not appear on our geography “citation index,” which tells us who reads what and enumerates the “impact factor” of different geography journals. This dire situation militates against the form of critical

²² Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *American Historical Review* 99 (1994), 1473–90 (quotation at 1476).

²³ In any case, see J. Gutiérrez and P. López-Nieva, “Are International Journals of Human Geography Really International?” *Progress in Human Geography* 25, 1 (March 2001): 53–69. Their answer is a qualified “no.”

dialogue I have been advocating. Crucially, it stifles reflection on the ways in which scholarly interests and positions are cultivated and policed in “regional” journals like *BC Studies* or the “international” ones I am supposed to read and write for.

Let me further describe this situation from two angles. On the one hand, the “international” *respectability* of much recent British geographical research on empire stems from what Benita Parry evocatively describes as “the implosion of Western culture under the impact of its inhabitation by other voices, histories, and experiences.”²⁴ A number of Western disciplines are now arguably haunted by the spectre of otherness, exclusion, and marginalization. We know, however, that some figures of marginality and difference are deemed to be more important than others, and it is arguably international theory that carries the local affairs of distant places into mainstream journals rather than the integrity of distant localities themselves. Case studies serving abstracted bodies of ideas abound, and when I referee papers for international journals I am urged to assess the “broader” (by implication global) implications of any local or case study material. There is nothing wrong with this system of research evaluation in itself, and I certainly do not seek to defend particularism and parochialism (or what geographers once called the *idiographic*); rather, I am suggesting that by keeping scholarship within certain disciplinary and interdisciplinary bounds, and presiding over what theory, practice, and empirical work mean to one another, the system I am in marginalizes some lines of inquiry and misses the relevance of what, to others, are important local problems.

On the other hand, we have an ex-colonial region such as British Columbia, where the process of cultural implosion described by Parry (which, of course, is clearly present in many North American cities) was preceded by the colonial juxtaposition of cultures – by imposition and its practical mediation. What bearing does a Western-intellectual-metropolitan concern with implosion and critical determination to deconstruct the centre have on somewhere like British Columbia? How is theory freighted in from afar and unpacked? How does “international theory” work as a code of local/global translation? And is it possible to think across settler-colonial, dependent-colonial, and metropolitan-postcolonial spaces, and think between the critical imperatives that flow from these dynamics of

²⁴ Benita Parry, “The Postcolonial: Conceptual Category or Chimera?” *Yearbook of English Studies* 27 (1997): 3.

implosion and imposition?²⁵ The luxury of *BC Studies* is that it is able to provide a forum for a type of scholarship and lively mix of disciplinary imaginations that would not get into the “international” journals in which I am supposed to publish. The problem for *BC Studies*, however (or so it seems to me), is that “regional” scholarship will mean less, and may matter less, if it is not hooked up to, and in a sense does not compete with, relevant ideas that come from elsewhere. Geographers are using empire to pluralize and relativize conceptions of their discipline, and they are shaping new centres and margins of critical inquiry and significance. Scholarship on British Columbia’s colonial past and its relations with the present is plural enough, but I wonder whether it is as open as it might be to the dense traffic of ideas that swirls around its borders. I read the recent publications of BC scholars who work in my neck of the historical woods and see them grappling with the international critical literature on colonialism in interesting ways. But I also see them shielding the forms of regional academic practice and social memory that they have worked so hard to cultivate from the full force of postcolonial critiques that insist that we historicize our work with reference to its site(s) of production.²⁶

To return for a moment to the issue of settler colonialism, I wonder about the extent to which scholars of British Columbia’s colonial past take the specificity of the settler-colonial dynamics they work on for granted. Might commonplace ideas about the nature of colonial power and history of Aboriginal-Western relations in this (our) part of the world – the deployment of sovereign and disciplinary tactics of power, for instance, and processes of directed and undirected change among Aboriginal groups – be problematized by comparing and contrasting “the BC experience” with some radically different colonial time or space? Such a comparative turn in BC studies would not turn the facts of regional history on their head, of course, but it might generate some new debates about the predicaments of postcoloniality (or gravity of colonial history) in British Columbia. We are at liberty to domesticate postcolonial theories for our own

²⁵ For an incisive reading of such issues, see Kay Anderson, “Thinking ‘Postnationally’: Dialogue across Multicultural, Indigenous, and Settler Space,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, 2 (2000): 381–91.

²⁶ Compare, for example, Robin Fisher, “Vancouver’s Vision of Native Peoples: The Northwest Coast and Hawai’i,” in *Pacific Empires: Essays in Honour of Glyndwr Williams*, ed. Alan Frost and Jane Samson (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 147–63 with Daniel Clayton, “On the Colonial Genealogy of George Vancouver’s Chart of the Northwest Coast of North America,” *Ecumene: A Journal of Cultural Geographies* 7, 4 (2000): 371–401.

ends and thus make BC history travel a little further afield. But we might also take Thomas's injunction to localize seriously by probing what we take for granted about the past and our historical materials, and by accounting for the ways in which our more or less multicultural roots and routes between here and there have taken shape. We might find much less solace in that small word "local" and find the larger word "global" less threatening.

Perhaps I worry too much about the relations of power and meaning that inhere in the viewing positions from which we study the world, and I do not want to turn these personal musings – my dirty orange mist – into a clarion call or trite *BC Studies* wish list. If we can take anything from my short story about British Columbia and the RGS, then it is perhaps the thought that questions of absence and memory have an intimate bearing on how we account for ourselves as scholars and critics, wherever we are. Partly because of empire, and now because of globalization, many of us are accountable to a number of locations. Indeed, many of us are caught between places, draw our critical breath from various invented traditions and diasporic sensibilities that have become more pronounced as the world has shrunk, and worry about how scholarship finds its place and purpose in a world that seems more mixed up than ever before. Edward Said notes that our era "has become an era of a search for roots, of people trying to discover in the collective memory of their race, religion, community, and family a past that is entirely their own, secure from the ravages of history and a turbulent time."²⁷ Postcolonial thinkers are right to point up the pitfalls in this recourse to memory and absence (to exodus and diaspora) as a transgressive feature of the present. They rightly point to scenes of carnage in the Balkans, central Africa, and the Middle East, and how problems in these parts of the world turn, in important ways, on the reinvention and manipulation of the past. They also stress that a migrant, diasporic, or cosmopolitan criticism hardly delivers its critical message from a position of strength within global force fields of power. But the postcolonial critic also insists that, for better or worse, these ways of making sense of the present are here to stay and, to a degree, cage our intellectual options.

In the wake of the student protests of May 1968, the French thinker Michel Foucault drew a distinction between the "specific intellectual" and the "universal intellectual." The former, he said, abandon's the latter's quest for universally valid theories and the desire to speak "in

²⁷ Edward W. Said, "Invention, Memory and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000): 177.

the capacity of master of truth and justice”; rather, the specific intellectual provides tools of analysis for tackling particular – Foucault used the terms “local” and “regional” – problems and is mindful of the fact that s/he has to work within society’s power structures and cannot place her/himself “somewhat ahead and to the side” of power games.²⁸ We might now graft another distinction on to Foucault’s: that between the “footloose/homeless/exilic” intellectual and the “settled/sedentary” intellectual. The former (Said is perhaps the premier example) is concerned with the creation and critique of borders and boundaries of all kinds (disciplinary, national, cultural, institutional), and searches for new ways of universalizing questions of suffering and oppression.²⁹ The footloose intellectual exerts critical influence by placing her/himself in exile (by cultivating a virtual relationship with the way truth speaks to power) as well as by being exiled by history, and s/he regards nostalgia as both the primum mobile and scourge of intellectual life. The latter, by contrast, dedicates her/himself to the examination of particular sufferings and oppressions, and more bounded hybridities, and warns of the perils of exilic criticism, of the view from nowhere. Settled/sedentary intellectuals often work with a powerful sense of canon and exert critical influence through a different comportment with reality – through the creation and critique of partial truths and local language games, and by reimagining the public role of the intellectual from national-cultural bases rather than from a cosmopolitan global home.

Thinkers like Said teach us that these ideas of absence and memory, and the tensions between these two representations of the intellectual, stalk our geographies of intellectual labour and our commitments to each other. Such ideas and tensions stalk what was once prized as meticulous local empirical research, heighten our awareness of cultures’ intertwined histories and geographies, and rejuvenate our commitments to theory. In some basic respects, British Columbia is a product of such questions and the intellectual conditions that they

²⁸ Michel Foucault, “Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation with Gilles Deleuze” (1972), in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 205–17. See also Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 262–64, who provides a judicious assessment of whether we can call Foucault a specific intellectual.

²⁹ I garner this distinction, in part, from Bryan S. Turner’s deft overview and reading of Said’s life and work. Bryan S. Turner, “Edward W. Said,” in *Profiles in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Anthony Elliott and Bryan S. Turner (London: Sage, 2001), 382–93. See also Said’s *Representations of the Intellectual* (London: Vintage, 1994).

entail. British Columbia is premised on the jarring and unnerving juxtaposition of different cultures in manufactured spaces that restructured local conceptions of the alien and the familiar in highly unequal ways, and negotiated connections with the centre (with Britain and Canada) in distinct ways. And it is now a place that has to accommodate discrepant ways of telescoping the past into the present and of handling the divergent voices of multiple others. Maybe my worries are not so distant, not so personal, and not so spread out after all.