GUEST EDITORIAL
The Question of Making Native Space

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THIS ISSUE OF *BC STUDIES* honours Cole Harris's book *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (UBC Press, 2002), which has won the 2002 Sir John A. Macdonald Prize (for "best book in Canadian history") and a Clio Award (for "exceptional contributions to regional history") from the Canadian Historical Association, the Royal Canadian Geographical Society's 2003 Massey Medal (for "outstanding achievement in Canadian Geography"), and the K.D. Shivastava Prize from UBC Press (for "excellence in scholarly publishing"). This editorial is occasioned by Harris's achievement, and it is my pleasure to briefly comment on both his accomplishments in this book and his wider contribution to the fields of geography and British Columbian studies.[1]

Harris has long been one of North America's leading historical geographers and one of the most eloquent and respected methodological voices within the discipline of geography. He is very much the historian's geographer (concerned with how we write historical narratives of geographical change) rather than the geographer's historian (interested in the intellectual development of his field), and is perhaps best known to Canadians for his editorship of the *Historical Atlas of Canada*, vol. 1: *From the beginning to 1800* (1987), and his co-editorship (with Jean Barman) of this journal.[2] But he has also written a number of influential "disciplinary" essays about the nature and importance of historical perspectives within geography, and has long favoured regional synthesis, the study of rural landscapes, and a

[1] Henceforth, I will reference quotations from the book by page number only. Some of the observations I make stem from numerous conversations I have had with Harris over the years about questions of geography, colonialism and much else besides.

[2] This volume was winner of the 1988 Macdonald Prize.

materialist focus on the relations between land and life as modes of historical-geographical inquiry.[3]

I started to work with him as a graduate student at UBC when the *Historical Atlas* was just out and his mind was turning to more concerted research on British Columbia. And what many of us in his circle at that time started to explore – broadly, the historical geography of Native-white relations – was fuelled by his infectious intellectual enthusiasm and deep concern over the nature and effects of contact and colonialism in his province.[4] Much of the research for *Making Native Space* was completed during the two years that Harris occupied the distinguished Brenda and David McLean Chair in Canadian Studies at UBC (1997-1999). But in many respects, the book is the culmination of over a decade of work on the historical geography of British Columbia and a piece of scholarship that is emblematic of Harris's vision of geography. It is also Harris's most political work to date and arguably the most significant contribution to our understanding of colonialism in the province since Robin Fisher's *Contact and Conflict* (1977).

Harris writes that he wanted to tell a story about "the colonial construction of space in British Columbia" because it is "basic," and because "it may be some measure of the thinness of our understanding of ourselves – and of our disinclination to admit how enmeshed our lives have been and remain in the strategies and tactics of colonialism – that considerable parts [of this story] have not been told before" (xxi, xxviii). *Making Native Space* charts the vastly one-sided construction of British Columbia's Native reserve system between the 1850s and 1930s, focusing on the range of voices that shaped debate and protest over land and resources and particularly on how Native voices became denigrated and ignored. Harris shows how an immigrant society that was driven by tenets of self-improvement, backed by the

[3] Harris's most important methodological essays are: "Theory and Synthesis in Historical Geography," *Canadian Geographer* 15 (1971), 157-72; "The Historical Mind and the Practice of Geography," in *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems,* eds. D. Ley and M. Samuels (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 123-37; and "Power, Modernity and Historical Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81 (1991), 67-83. For brilliant examples of the materialist and synthesising qualities of his work, see "Industry and the Good Life Around Idaho Peak," in his *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 194-218 (orig. pub. *Canadian Historical Review*, 1985); and "The Simplification of Europe Overseas," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 67:4 (1977), 469-83.

[4] Harris became Professor of Geography at UBC in 1973, and up to his retirement, in 2002, taught two remarkable courses on "The Historical Geography of Canada" and "The Historical Geography of British Columbia". For full biographical details of his academic career, see http://www.library.ubc.ca/archives/u_arch/harris.html#bio.

state and a duplicitous rule of law, and infused by the interests of industrial capital, created a colonising discourse and suite of power relations that transformed and alienated – and even made – Native space. It was during this period, and principally through various Indian Reserve Commissions, he argues, that "the [discontinuous] line separating the Indian reserves from the rest became, in a sense, the primal line on the land of British Columbia, the one that facilitated or constrained all others" (xciii). And he describes the reserves themselves as "primal spaces" (at once primordial and deemed primitive) that bear witness to the triumph of a white colonising culture "over a tentative, emerging idea of multiple modernities with consequences writ to this day all over the moral landscape of British Columbia" (265, 166). The moral of Harris's story is that "those of us who comprise this settler society need to acknowledge not only the remarkable achievement of creating modern British Columbia, but also the destruction that has accompanied it" (322). And he concludes that we might start to do so, and rethink how land and resources are currently allocated, by coming to terms with two basic yet opposing stories about land and opportunity that are inscribed in the reserve map that he so scrupulously reconstructs. One of them is about dispossession (told mainly by Native people), and the other is about development (preached by newcomers).

For me, however, this is not Harris's only message. While this book is primarily about British Columbia, it will be more widely read and appreciated for what it says about the spatiality of colonialism, or what Harris sees as colonialism's "geographical core" (xxiv). Harris writes as a geographer at a moment in the history of his discipline when questions of colonialism and empire are much in the theoretical air and have become the focus of a considerable body of geographical scholarship.[5] He pays scant attention to disciplinary matters in this book but in my view offers (however unwittingly) a powerful and important programme for a postcolonial historical geography that significantly departs from current critical norms.

One of my basic concerns about much of the recent geographical literature on the imperial/colonial past is that it fixates on the formal disciplinary links between geography and empire, and tends to view the colonial world from the imperial centre. Much of this literature

[5] For an overview of these developments in geography see Daniel Clayton, "Critical Imperial and Colonial Geographies," in Kay Anderson, Mona Domosh, Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (eds.), *Handbook of Cultural Geography* (London: Sage, 2003), 354-68.

tends to obscure and flatten understanding of the diverse ways in which colonial geographies and strategies of power were assembled and deployed in particular margins of empire. It does so by approaching colonialism through select spatial projects such as exploration, cartography and travel-writing, and by insufficiently contextualising their make-up and effects of power in different colonial periods and places. Furthermore, geographers' focus on "geography's empire" can easily become a seductive yet ethereal intellectual pastime: one that might successfully purge the (former) imperial centre of its bad epistemological habits but that barely connects with the practical predicaments of formerly and currently colonised peoples and places.[6] I am not suggesting that historical-geographical work, like Harris's, that is in touch with "real world" postcolonial problems is better than that which deconstructs empire from its metropolitan and disciplinary base camps, and barely escapes them. Rather, I think we need more dialogue between geographers working in and on different centres and margins of empire, and, as Dipesh Chakrabarty urges, more acknowledgement of the idea that such centres and margins are plural and diverse.[7]

Making Native Space might be read as both a vindication and victim of this observation. On the one hand, Harris notes that he is neither a close student of the imperial imagination nor a slavish follower of the powerful postcolonial theories that have been promulgated to expose and subvert its global power and lingering effects. He is not this sort of postcolonial creature, in part, because he lives in a place that he thinks has been less tightly gripped by imperial Britain than by a peculiarly British Columbian admixture of metropolitan and colonial, provincial and federal, and native and newcomer agendas and conflicts. Harris is not interested in empire so much as in how a regionally opportunistic and insidious force field of power crept up on Native people and their land, at some points aggressively and at others self-consciously. It is this historical recognition, coupled with Harris's meticulously researched findings about how colonialism dispossessed indigenous people in a British Columbian context, that fuels his suspicion of an international postcolonial literature that, in his view, tends to overplay the hands of culture and discourse relative

[6] See Felix Driver, "Geography's Empire: Histories of Geographical Knowledge," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 (1992), 23-40; and Alison Blunt and Cheryl McEwan, eds., *Postcolonial Geographies* (London: Continuum, 2002).

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

to other forms of power.[8] To some extent, however, Harris's sense of British Columbia's distance from the imperial centre, combined with his circumspection about postcolonial theory and the geographical literature on empire, causes him to insulate the historical geography he reconstructs from some potentially fruitful comparative lines of inquiry and a fuller digging into theory.[9]

On the other hand, Harris recognises that attempts to regionalise our understanding of colonialism that do not engage wider theoretical questions and literatures will quickly become vapid, introverted, and fail to account for their own assumptions.[10] And so it is that various types of theory enter his narrative frame early in the book and are used selectively and judiciously throughout. Harris is well acquainted with some of the best theoretical and historical work on modernity and colonialism, and the philosophy and attenuated practice of liberalism in Canada, and is sensitive to postcolonialism's emphasis on questions of discourse and identity. Yet he never "lets theory loose" in British Columbia, as he puts it (xvii), and never loses sight of the intense materiality and physicality of colonial dispossession.

At the same time, however, it seems to me that Harris favours (again however unwittingly) a certain postcolonial narrative and arrives at a position on colonialism that is by no means restricted to British Columbia's historical experience. He teases out what Edward Said has described as the "systemic discipline" with which questions of power and representation came to be dominated by imperial and colonial cultures.[11] He also sees the opposing primal spaces of colonialism in British Columbia as leitmotivs of Frantz Fanon's generalisation that the colonial world was "a world divided into compartments."[12] Such ideas frame and add authority to Harris's attempt to show how, over time, and especially post-1871, a range of economic, political, legal and cultural discourses on Native land and

[8] These issues are addressed explicitly in a forthcoming essay by Harris entitled, "How Did Colonialism Dispossess? Comments from an Edge of Empire," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, in press.

[9] Harris might have made more comparative sense, for example, of colonial projects in Britain's different settler colonies in the second half of the nineteenth century. For recent geographical work on such matters, see, for example, Judith Kenny, ed., "Colonial Geographies: Accommodation and Resistance," special issue of *Historical Geography* 27 (1999); Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

[10] Statements to this effect can be found in Harris's introductions to *Making Native Space* and *The Resettlement of British Columbia*.

[11] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 7 and *passim*.

[12] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 37-8; *Making Native Space*, xxiv.

life inclined towards systematic dispossession, and an expansion in state powers of regulation and, to some degree, surveillance. He is mindful of those moments in this history of dispossession (for example, the time of Governor James Douglas and particularly that of the Indian Reserve Commissioner G.M. Sproat, to whom the book is dedicated) when things might have come out differently. But he knows that it is narrow-minded to engage in a virtual, recuperative – what if – type of historical work that dwells on such "heroes." For while the alternative history that one might provide by dwelling on such moments and characters may ease postcolonial guilt about the sins of colonialism, it defers the more essential critical task of enriching and complicating understanding of a history that has actually happened and cannot be wished away.

It is for these reasons, I think, that the idea of "making'"– of making space, discourse, power, and so on – lies at the heart of Harris's work. To the lay reader, *Making Native Space* may sound like an odd or ironic title for a book that is ostensibly about a process of taking away and crimping what Native people had before colonialism. One might regard "Remaking Native Space" or "Dispossessing Native People" as more fitting titles. But this idea of "making" is I think crucial to what Harris is doing, both empirically and conceptually. This term captures not so much the sense of human agency invested in the title of E.P. Thompson's famous book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and the wider tradition of social history writing that Thompson in many ways inspired – both of which Harris admires – as a body of postcolonial theory and scholarship that emphasises the productivity of discourse and power. While Harris makes little of Said's influential study *Orientalism* (1978) in the book, it seems to me that he has absorbed a body of ideas about the ascriptive power of colonial discourse – its ability to ascribe ideas about identity and difference to particular places, spaces, environments and natures – that were initially advanced by Said. In line with Said, Harris shows that empire's immigrant-settler societies have neither simply relied on the "Other" for their sense of self, nor simply misrepresented the "Other"; they have actually produced, or made, the "Other" as part of themselves. In *Making Native Space*, as in *Orientalism*, "the Native" becomes a kind of warped mirror in which the White colonising self champions its agendas, and both sees and disavows the material and epistemic violence that it visits on the "Other." Natives (like Orientals)

are incorporated into internally structured colonial archives that speak *ex cathedra* on their behalf.[13]

For Harris, this type of "making" is central to what the past means to the present. He acknowledges the ambivalences and anxieties of colonial discourse that constitute one side of postcolonial theory and the colonial experience in British Columbia – and no more so than in the time and hands of Sproat. But Harris is saying that however fractured and contested the making of the reserve system was at certain points, it essentially bears the hegemonic imprint of the colonising culture that made it. Native reserves are not simply to be viewed as spaces that were set aside for Native people; they do not simply amount to the "Other's" eography. As Harris suggests, Native space was actively made anew by a vigorous colonial and Canadian regime of power, and Native reserves should be viewed as unsettling moral and political landscapes that still inhere in the dominant society and colonising culture that brought them into spatial existence. If new Native space is now to be made, Harris concludes, British Columbia needs to come to terms with this grossly uneven and unequal historical and geographical *making* of "the Native" as an object of power and subject of cultural assimilation and segregation.

Ironically, if there is a more general story to be told here, it is one that underscores the importance of the disciplinary perspective from which Harris writes yet which he underplays in this book. It is that in British Columbia, and probably many other colonial settings where Natives and colonists were brought into abrupt contact, the culture of colonialism was an inherently geographical culture and spatialising system of power. In my view, Harris provides a timely and potent model for the critical appreciation of colonialism's geographies rather than geography's empire – a model in which there is no easy substitute for careful archival work and a careful listening to the past. Nor can I think of a more telling place from which to register the claim that postcolonialism is intrinsically about colonialism – about the critical need to transpose unresolved experiences and feelings of subjection, despair and culpability onto the past.

[13] A point that Said has reiterated in the context of the recent military onslaught on Iraq in his preface to the 2003 Penguin Books re-issue of *Orientalism*.