

# HISTORIES OF SETTLER COLONIALISM: *Considering New Currents*

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IN APRIL 2016, HISTORIAN Jerry Bannister posted an entry on the *Acadiensis* blog entitled “Settler Colonialism and the Future of Canadian History.” This well circulated piece summarizes a broader conversation about changing public, political, and scholarly understandings of Canada. In Bannister’s view, the increasing prominence of settler colonial approaches has brought historians and others to a significant “tipping point” or a “larger cultural shift” towards envisaging Canada as a settler colonial place. In making this point, Bannister references the rise and consolidation of settler colonial studies as an international scholarly field. In the past six years, in particular, scholars have defined, theorized, and investigated settler colonialism as a distinct and enduring mode of domination. Rooted especially in analyses of settler texts, this work focuses on identifying distinguishing characteristics of settler colonialism, including a specific concern for the dispossession and disappearance of Indigenous peoples, the long-term settlement of (favoured) newcomers, and the establishment of new political orders and settler sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on the possibilities of this work for Canadian historians, Bannister concludes that “settler colonialism is where the academic winds are blowing.”<sup>2</sup>

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\* Henry Yu provided the initial impetus for this special issue, which has come to fruition only with the support and work of Graeme Wynn, Richard Mackie, and Leanne Coughlin at *BC Studies*. In particular, it owes much to Graeme’s generous and wise guidance throughout the process and to Richard’s work to make the forum happen. Eryk Martin, Laura Madokoro, Michel Ducharme, and Tamara Myers listened and advised. Thank you.

<sup>1</sup> Both reflective of and influential in the recent consolidation of settler colonial studies have been the journal *Settler Colonial Studies* (established 2011) and Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). For a recent overview of settler colonialism in the Canadian context, see Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker, *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Bannister, “Settler Colonialism and the Future of Canadian History,” *Acadiensis* blog, 18 April 2016, <https://acadiensis.wordpress.com/2016/04/18/settler-colonialism-and-the-future-of-canadian-history/>.

In British Columbia, however, these “academic winds” have not emerged from still air. Recent analyses of settler colonialism in the province owe much to deeper traditions of Indigenous activism and resistance as well as to scholarly studies that have long understood and challenged British Columbia as a fundamentally colonial place.<sup>3</sup> To identify a settler colonial turn as a distinguishing mark of current historical practice would do injustice to earlier research, insurgent work, and lived experience in British Columbia. Yet this is a useful moment to take stock of the field. What do analyses of settler colonialism reveal, and what might they obscure? How does the BC context refract the questions or approaches of settler colonial studies broadly conceived? How might historians of British Columbia work through and beyond a focus on settler colonialism, in connection with other fields, to understand relations of power in this place? And how and why do such histories continue to matter?

This special issue of *BC Studies* takes up these questions. It brings together articles from four historians: myself (University of British Columbia), Sabina Trimble (University of Victoria), Madeline Rose Knickerbocker (Simon Fraser University), and Sarah Nickel (University of Saskatchewan). The articles explore settler narratives about children and the colonial future in the 1850s and 1860s (Ishiguro); the long history of Indigenous and settler storytelling about place, with a focus on Swí:lhcha/Cultus Lake (Trimble); and Indigenous political actors’ assertions of sovereignty in the context of constitutional patriation debates in the 1970s and 1980s (Knickerbocker and Nickel). It also includes a forum on Adele Perry’s recently published *Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World*. This book reassesses central figures in colonial British Columbia – James Douglas, Amelia Connolly, and their extended family – and takes them as a lens onto the lived histories of the nineteenth-century British Empire more broadly. Reflecting on this book and its refiguring of colonial histories, the forum includes pieces by Daniel Clayton (University of St. Andrews), Fae Dussart (University of Sussex), Heather Devine (University of Calgary), and Tony Ballantyne (University of Otago) as well as a response from Perry (University of Manitoba).

<sup>3</sup> Previous special issues of *BC Studies* are testament to this scholarly work, its trajectories, and its significance in BC historiography. See the following issues: “Past Emergent,” 152 (Winter 2006/07); “Native Geographies,” 138/39 (Summer/Autumn 2003); “Perspectives on Aboriginal Culture,” 135 (Autumn 2002); “Ethnographic Eyes,” 126 (Spring/Summer 2000); “Native Peoples and Colonialism,” 115/16 (Autumn/Winter 1997–98); “In Celebration of Our Survival: The First Nations of British Columbia,” 89 (Spring 1991); and “British Columbia: A Place for Aboriginal Peoples?,” 57 (Spring 1983).

Building from existing scholarship, the articles in this special issue position the construction of racialized difference and exclusion, claims to land and sovereignty, familial and social lives, and contested political formations as critical to the dynamics of power and changes in the relationships among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the province. They also push in new directions, asking how historians might investigate settler colonialism without taking for granted its meanings, distinctiveness, and ascendancy in British Columbia. Drawing on the methodologies and frameworks of fields too often separated – histories of the future, childhood and family, settler colonial studies, and Indigenous history – the articles offer new insights into the configurations and limits of settler colonialism. At the heart of this special issue lies the shared conviction that settler colonialism has played a powerful and often violent role in shaping British Columbia, even as it has been a profoundly vulnerable, contingent, and aspirational project that has never entirely contained the identities, experiences, and relations of power in this place.

Scholars have long debated the nature of colonial power in the fur trade world of northwestern North America.<sup>4</sup> However, many broadly agree that the mid-nineteenth century marked a critical moment on the Pacific slope. Particularly after 1858, and even as they were sometimes thwarted or refracted in practice, British and Canadian politicians, commentators, and others increasingly prioritized and facilitated the occupation and exploitation of Indigenous territory by white (especially British) settlers. From the mid-nineteenth century, for example, they developed racialized laws and practices of exclusion that targeted Indigenous people as well as newcomer people of colour both at and within the borders of British Columbia. These changes reflected aspirations towards a settler society modelled on metropolitan structures and values, which were widely (though not exclusively) shared by British settlers and colonial administrators. At the same time, though, Douglas was at the peak of his influence in the Vancouver Island and mainland colonies, and, as Perry's book and the forum reveal, his understandings of governance interrupt any sense of a straightforward shift towards "settler colonialism." Since the foundations of settler colonialism in British Columbia have been particularly associated with the mid-nineteenth century, however, this special issue begins in that moment.

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<sup>4</sup> For one recent discussion, see Adele Perry, "Designing Dispossession: The Select Committee on the Hudson's Bay Company, Fur-Trade Governance, Indigenous Peoples and Settler Possibility," in *Indigenous Communities and Settler Colonialism: Land Holding, Loss and Survival in an Interconnected World*, ed. Zoë Laidlaw and Alan Lester, 158-72 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

The opening article, “Growing Up and Grown Up,” examines the ideas, policies, and practices of British people engaged with British Columbia in the mid-nineteenth century by exploring adult discourses on children and the future. During the colonial period, an imagined settler future – full of white British families, claiming secure and enduring settler sovereignty – was deeply vulnerable and far from certain. I argue that, facing anxiety and fearing disappointment, British adults invested both financially and emotionally in their children, positioning them at the centre of a broader politics of settler colonial aspiration in British Columbia. I develop this argument by focusing on the children in the Royal Engineers community of Sapperton between 1858 and 1863. There were an extraordinary number of British children there, and their presence and lives were shaped by adult expectations for the settler future; these aspirations and the children themselves worked, in turn, to shape decisions related to colonial budgets, education policy, military missions, and land. By tracing the enduring yet fragile underpinnings of settler confidence in Sapperton, this article demonstrates that an imagined future was central to the foundations of settler colonialism in British Columbia and that children were positioned as politicized subjects and critical actors in this future.

In the next article, “Storying Swí:lhcha,” Sabina Trimble develops a compelling comparative analysis of Stó:lō and settler stories about one site – Swí:lhcha, or Cultus Lake. She investigates and contextualizes three kinds of stories – origin stories, trail stories about movement, and boundary-making stories about exclusion. By drawing Indigenous and settler stories into the same analytic frame, Trimble shows that specific stories differ over time, and between and among storytellers, but notes that the significance remains broadly shared as they shape and express understandings of place, identity, belonging, and power. At the lake, stories have played a critical role in shaping Indigenous communities, driving and justifying settler colonial processes of dispossession, and defining changing relationships among Indigenous and settler people. Overall, Trimble’s analysis reveals a history of the lake, and British Columbia, that is simultaneously Indigenous and settler, a place not colonized but rather both “shared and contested.”

The third article in this issue centres Indigenous peoples’ perspectives on a key political moment in the late twentieth century. In “Negotiating Sovereignty,” Madeline Rose Knickerbocker and Sarah Nickel explain how and why Indigenous people in British Columbia asserted sovereignty during debates about the patriation of the Canadian Constitution

between 1975 and 1983. There was much at stake for Indigenous peoples here, including the opportunity to shape constitutional definitions of Indigenous rights, the possibilities of sovereign nationhood, and the continuation and expansion of state obligations that had been entrenched within a longer history of relationships (however troubled) with the British Crown. Focusing on members of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs and Stó:lō communities, Knickerbocker and Nickel demonstrate that Indigenous political actors articulated multiple and changing expressions of sovereignty, which represented different strategies to assert Indigenous knowledge on Indigenous terms, to resist settler colonialism, and to negotiate relationships with the Canadian state in the late twentieth century. Understood in combination, these expressions of sovereignty reveal what Knickerbocker and Nickel call “the continuity and flexibility of BC Indigenous political thought and practice.” Overall, the article demonstrates that the history of constitutional patriation is not merely a political and legal story of the Canadian settler state; it is also a history of Indigenous politics in British Columbia.

At once focused case studies and wide-ranging analyses, these three articles move between local, provincial, national, and international scales but concentrate geographically on communities in the Lower Mainland. Stó:lō histories are central in two of the articles; this, in part, reflects the influence of the Ethnohistory Field School for graduate students, which has shaped a generation of scholars working on Indigenous history in the province.<sup>5</sup> Although ranging from time immemorial to the present, the articles focus especially on the processes of settler colonialism that shaped the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To trace these histories, the authors read well trodden archives from new angles, bring often separate perspectives into the same analytic frame, and offer new interpretations of familiar narratives.

The three articles are written by four young women, Indigenous and settler, trained as historians. We are early-career scholars based in western Canadian universities, and each of us writes from some degree of academic insecurity and privilege. As a settler and academic occupying Coast Salish territory, I recognize the benefits I have received from the structures and discourses of settler colonialism that I investigate. Together, we four authors understand that our positions have encouraged us to ask particular questions, facilitated or restricted our access to certain

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<sup>5</sup> This is hosted by the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, with the history departments of the University of Victoria and the University of Saskatchewan. See “Ethnohistory Field School with the Stó:lō,” <http://web.uvic.ca/vv/stolo/materials.php>.

stories and sources, influenced how we understand our responsibilities to our subjects and communities, and shaped the forms in which we share our research in the articles. While the specifics vary, our work is brought together by a shared conviction that, although settler colonialism has been central to the making of British Columbia, it does not completely account for relations of power in this place.

These concerns thread through the forum that follows the articles. Here, four scholars from Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom reflect on Adele Perry's recent book, *Colonial Relations*, through perspectives sharpened by various locations and research foci. In conversation, the forum essays discuss how Perry's work refigures histories of the British Empire and points to new questions about love, identity, power, place, and colonialism. In its attention to the wider imperial world, *Colonial Relations* reframes a historiography of fur trade families that has been rooted in northwestern North America. At the same time, with its commitment to the particularities of place, the book sparks compelling reflections on the very meaning of empire and the possibilities of writing its histories. Positioned in these tensions between the local and the trans-imperial, *Colonial Relations* refracts conventional chronologies of imperial change over time and raises questions about the coherence of empire's "centre" when considered from what Perry calls its "ragged margins" (257). In addition to these points, the forum also considers the challenge posed by *Colonial Relations* to current approaches to settler colonialism. Perry's work underscores that other relationships and configurations of power persisted and interrupted "settler colonial" forms, while Indigenous people actively engaged with colonial systems; in this way, she produces what Ballantyne calls "a messy, more nuanced, and contradictory" framing of settler colonialism. Drawing together these issues, the forum celebrates the richness of *Colonial Relations* as it reconfigures understandings of colonialism in the nineteenth-century British Empire.

Taken in sum, the articles and forum in this special issue tell political, legal, social, and cultural histories that grapple with the meanings of the local and the imperial, Indigenous and state relations, land policy and practice, intimacy and everyday experience, and the stories that have made British Columbia. In a range of ways, they centre Indigenous histories, interrogate settler assumptions, and consider the place of persistence and fissure in colonial forms. Through this work, the special issue takes stock of the field and offers new perspectives on both the power and the fundamental limitations of settler colonialism in British Columbia. We pursue such interventions in several key ways.

First, the articles in this special issue centre perspectives, actors, and subjects that have been marginalized or missed in earlier scholarship. By considering the significant place of children in Sapperton, for example, my article sheds new light on the history of the Royal Engineers in British Columbia – a topic that has hitherto been explored through a focus on the men’s work and, to a lesser extent, the experiences of women associated with the detachment. More broadly, I point to the critical but understudied significance of children in the logics of settler colonialism in British Columbia. Trimble’s work highlights the value of understanding a wide range of sources (both Indigenous and settler) as *stories*, particular narrations about place, history, and belonging. Taking up this point, for example, she demonstrates that origin stories do not relate solely to a deep past but also fundamentally shaped the trajectories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century contestations over land, sovereignty, and dispossession in Stó:lō territory. Knickerbocker and Nickel also focus on Indigenous perspectives and, in so doing, decentre the Canadian settler state and its narratives, which have been the conventional focus of studies on constitutional patriation. In related but distinct ways, then, we focus on key aspects of settler colonial studies – governance, land, race, sovereignty, and social structures – but by centring different perspectives and actors, the articles work to reorient familiar understandings of settler politics.

Second, the articles in this special issue argue for the importance of drawing on the methodologies, questions, and frameworks of a range of fields, often separated from one another. As we show, this can unsettle the long-established binary of “Indigenous” and “settler,” and encourages renewed interrogation of settler narratives of power, confidence, stability, and supremacy. So Trimble, Knickerbocker, and Nickel draw from their training in Indigenous history to ask different questions of the evidence and to employ new approaches to important topics understood only partly, it turns out, through analyses focused on settler colonial formations. These articles do not seek to obscure significant differences between fields but, rather, bring the approaches of ethnohistory, oral history, and research engaging with Indigenous communities to bear on questions about settler colonialism. By centring Indigenous peoples’ experiences, knowledge, and work, these two articles challenge historical narratives that have implied (intentionally or otherwise) settler colonial ascendancy or hegemony. Settler colonial studies tend to hinge on the terms of settler states and societies, and in doing so, they run the risk of reducing Indigenous histories to “resistance.” However, these articles remind us that the full significance of the continued, flexible, and changing

histories of Indigenous people cannot be understood in settler colonial frameworks, even as they reveal much about British Columbia.

My article differs from the others by focusing exclusively on British sources and perspectives. I draw heavily from documents produced by British men who worked as administrators and military officers, and framed and enacted colonial policies in British Columbia – in other words, from the texts of those empowered by (or who empowered themselves within) the emerging settler colonial structures of governance. But I contend that discursive analysis of these settler records is critical for understanding the ideas and assumptions that have driven settler colonialism. I also draw inspiration from fields that have had limited influence on the writing of BC history, including scholarship on childhood and the future. These fields offer productive new lenses for investigating the discourses and logics of settler colonial governance, and for both interrogating and disrupting the perspectives of settler men.

Overall, our mixed approaches point to the need to challenge definitions of settler colonialism that reify divisions between “settler” and “Indigenous,” or that imply the finality or exclusivity of settler ideas. Trimble’s analysis highlights important connections between settler and Indigenous stories, while Knickerbocker and Nickel especially underscore the significance of differences within and between Indigenous political organizations. Perry’s book and the forum complicate such categories and their implied meanings altogether. In another vein, I propose a new concept – settler futurity – as a way of analyzing the distinctiveness of settler colonialism in aspiration but not necessarily in its manifestations or results on the ground. In these ways, the issue suggests that settler narratives and categories need interrogation at their roots. Although settler colonial frameworks offer an important set of interpretive tools for this work, they can only be part of a much larger scholarly toolkit for understanding histories of power and identity in this place.

There are other histories to be told, of course, and other ways to tell them. Non-Indigenous people of colour have been important actors in histories of settler colonialism in British Columbia, but their perspectives and lived experiences have been comparatively marginalized. Moving forward, I hope that there will be more critical work that investigates histories of settler colonialism and non-Indigenous people of colour and that, in the process, interrogates and further unsettles binaries between white settlers and Indigenous people. In addition, such scholarly conversations should be considered in relation to other forms of history-telling as insurgent work, community-driven research, and public acts will



continue to shape and intervene in understandings of settler colonialism. As this special issue comes together in the spring of 2016, for example, many other important stories are being told across and about British Columbia – from the Unist’ot’en camp and the occupied Vancouver office of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada to the federal apology for the *Komagata Maru* “incident” and changing government positions on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>6</sup> The consequences of these stories and forms of storytelling remain to be worked out.

In this moment of scholarly attention, public conversation, and ongoing challenges to settler colonialism on the ground, the articles in this issue offer insights into the particular histories that have been central in shaping British Columbia and the lives of people here. In order to investigate the meanings, forms, and enduring implications of settler colonialism, our articles underscore the importance of drawing on methodologies and questions from adjacent fields, and considering a range of perspectives, peoples, and relationships that have been integral to British Columbia’s history. In so doing, this special issue reveals the importance of aspirational and lived settler power, the persistence of other stories and lived experiences despite settler narratives of exclusivity, and the necessity of unsettling settler colonial categories in defining BC history. If the scholarly winds are blowing towards settler colonial studies, then this special issue of *BC Studies* hopes to channel those currents towards new questions about a place that has been profoundly influenced – yet never contained or defined – by settler colonialism.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Unist’ot’en Camp, <http://unistoten.camp/>; Council of Mothers, “Occupy INAC – Vancouver Declares Victory, Exits INAC Offices,” in “#Occupy INAC Vancouver Ends Occupation,” Warrior Publications, 23 April 2016, <https://warriorpublications.wordpress.com/2016/04/23/occupy-inac-vancouver-ends-occupation/>; Renisa Mawani, “The Legacy of the *Komagata Maru*,” *Globe and Mail*, 18 May 2016, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/the-legacy-of-the-komagata-maru/article30066572/>; Erin Hanson, “UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” *Indigenous Foundations*, UBC, <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/global-indigenous-issues/un-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>.