Tripping on Pavements

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As a teenager in the 1980s, whether on the streets, in the shops, or in the schools of Victoria, British Columbia, I was an easy mark for the often unsolicited question: "Where are you from?" The question always allowed for a bit of imaginative play on my part, depending on who was doing the asking. I could talk about the exotic lands that they must have been conjuring in their orientalist fantasies gazing at my dark skin, dark eyes, and dark hair. Where else would a browned-skinned girl be from? Certainly not from this hemisphere. Or, once the question was raised, I could insist that I was truly from here, but this defence somehow sadly reaffirmed a structured non-belonging or displacement from being real in this place because the injury of exclusion was already established by its very utterance.

After the Fort Victoria Brick Project came to a conclusion in 1994[1] – a project that involved lining Government Street in downtown Victoria with the names of pioneers and settlers, my grandfather's name being placed literally on one of the bricks lining the street (see Figure 1) – it might have seemed that any question of how to take up place or being emplaced had been settled once and for all. However, in practices of naming, settling, and emplacing, questions proliferate.

Admittedly, it places one in a strange, somewhat existential, quandary to see one's family name etched into the pavement in line with other "settlers and pioneers" of Fort Victoria. This act of emplacement is not a simple gesture of placing the family name on some sort of equal footing with those of other settlers, whether white or non-white. The attempt to gloss over the differences is not lost on me. Nor is the fact that Fort Victoria, the colonist menagerie that attempted to erase and dispossess the Lekwungen Peoples/Songhees Nation and other tribal communities in the area of their land and place,[2] is something that I need to confront in the telling of our family's uneasy belonging. The fact

1 See http://www.victoria.ca/EN/main/residents/archives/faqs/fort-victoria-brick-project.html; https://talkinboutmygenerations.wordpress.com/ofhs/images-fort-victoria-brick-project/.

2 The Lekwungen Peoples inhabit several distinct nations and tribal communities on Vancouver Island and beyond. See http://www.songheesnation.ca/.

Figure 1. On Government Street, Fort Victoria Brick Project. Photo credit: Michael C.K. Ma.

that the granddaughters of the Atwoods or Wilsons, who are neighbour pavers, did not get asked the question "where are you from?" deserves some reflection, but it does not deserve to be our sole preoccupation. After all, the "Continuous Journey" legislation established in 1908 was not applied to the Atwoods and Wilsons – that was reserved for the express purpose of banning Indians from entering Canada and settling here. Chances are the Atwoods and Wilsons did not have to "anglicize" their surnames to fit into British Columbian nomenclature. The uneasy nature of this pavement, however, is born out of the fact that this brick, which has stolen and seeks to erase the land of the Lekwungen Peoples/ Songhees Nation, is also the brick that is meant to reinstate some sense of possessive inclusion for my family name.

This form of possessive inclusion is a tricky act of liberal recognition. It is the attempt to include "others" as settlers and pioneers, even though these same others were "undesirable" and "inadmissible" at the time of entry. Possessive inclusion structures how one is able to feel included, it is an emotional affective economy of belonging. The economy of belonging is based on the situated reality that belonging is only possible when there is amnesia regarding the loss of a name or identity and, in spite of this loss, an acceptance of the newly formed self. Here there is a great distance between the name, place, and location of Kehri/Pandher,

the village in Punjab that my grandfather left, and the invention of the name Bhandar, which he assumed later in life in Victoria and that now lines Government Street commemorating "settlers and pioneers." The invented name is more an indication of a loss of place than it is a marker of placement.

When my grandfather arrived in British Columbia, many Sikh men would only go by the last name Singh, which is the moniker that all Jhat Sikh men adopt. Our family surname, Bhandar, was a creation, an anglicization of the village name. My grandfather's children, some of whom were born in Victoria, decided on this spelling of the family name in order to be placeable within mainstream Canadian society. The name was a creation of his children, who grew up in Victoria among many Singhs who required surnames that would provide them with some particularity – with something that identified them.

When my grandfather first arrived in Victoria in 1906 from Kehri/Pandher, he was seeking a place to work and earn money to build a future back in his home village. He did leave Victoria and then returned after some years with his young wife and his nephew. After his second return, he never travelled back to his home; instead, he continued to work as a logger, eventually setting up a home and raising a large family. He helped to establish a Gurdwhara (Sikh temple), raised his children in a deeply racially segregated environment, established some sense of comfort for his family, and was unquestionably a foreigner. His children both yearned to belong to the dominant society and respected and retained the familiarity of the home. Living in between existences in language (Punjabi/English), religion (Sikhism/Christianity), and relationships (community/dominant Anglo-Christian society) meant that they had to constantly negotiate systems of differences. There was no question that they were not from "here," no matter how much they tried to rename themselves in order to pass. This led many of my father's generation to steadfastly belong, economically integrate, assert a possessive identification, and struggle for inclusion, rights of citizenship, and the franchise. This struggle was borne out in a way that led, ultimately, to a limited and qualified inclusion. The game of recognition requires a forgetting, a structured amnesia. The recognition that was won was built on forgetting the interconnections between dispossession, renaming, and loss of place. When I walk down the street whose pavement is lined with his name, Sardara Singh Bhandar, I am confronted with the question: What is the economy of possessive inclusion and who is paying?