The Erasure of Indigenous Presence in the Settler Geographic Imagination: 19th Century Vancouver Island

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Abstract

This essay examines the colonial constructions of Indigenous land usage on Vancouver Island in the 19th century. It turns first to the historiography of Indigenous presence in the Pacific-Northwest region to understand how Indigenous people had been represented in scholarship in the 19th and 20th centuries. For decades it was believed that Indigenous groups did not participate in the stewardship of their land or did not greatly impact it with their presence. By examining more recent scholarship on Indigenous agriculture this is proved to be a misrepresentation. It then turns to cartographic and ethnographic material produced by colonial officials and settlers that depicts Indigenous land usage and occupation in the mid-19th century, which used the purposeful erasure of Indigenous presence to justify colonial settlement. It combines the social stereotypes of the era with the perceived legitimising character of maps and photographs to understand how the settler's geographic imagination did not include the presence of Indigenous peoples on Vancouver Island. These cartographic and ethnographic materials created inaccurate representations of how Indigenous peoples managed and lived on their lands, confining them to small and untouched areas. It was only through the purposeful space created in these documents that a view of British Columbia and Vancouver Island being pristine, untouched, and untapped wildernesses could be born. The photographs of E.S. Curtis and colonial era maps of Victoria will be pivotal to this research, bringing to focus the world view of the Vancouver Island settler.

The colonial government of Vancouver Island and later, British Columbia, inevitably had to define and redefine the land they intended to occupy to manifest the white and resource-packed province they desired. Indigenous presence in this region therefore became caught in the crossfires of an aggressive and determined colonial government. This essay will prove that colonial construction of Indigenous land usage and occupation in the mid-19th century used the purposeful erasure of Indigenous presence to justify colonial settlement. On Vancouver Island specifically, government sanctioned cartography, ignorance of agricultural practices and social stereotypes of a lazy and vanishing Indigenous population legitimised this erasure, which functioned to create necessary space for settlers.

This essay will first acknowledge Douglas Deur and Nancy Turner's analysis of the historiography of Indigenous presence in the Pacific Northwest to understand how this topic has been misrepresented in previous scholarship. The authors make clear that scholars of plant cultivation and agriculture in North America's Pacific Northwest region have continuously overlooked the contributions of Indigenous groups.[90] Throughout the 19th and 20th Century scholars would sooner suggest that Indigenous peoples had little or no impact on the land which they occupied than depict the significant alterations they did undertake for their own agricultural purposes.[91] There was a carried assumption in historical analysis of these cultures that they did not tamper with the land in any way that resembled European agricultural practices.[92] In this narrative, Indigenous peoples remained wholly hunter-gatherers who took what they could get from the land when it was available to them. These ideas, which informed scholarly texts for decades, were based on limited exposure to both Indigenous people and their cultivation practices from very early contact in the fur trade era of British Columbia and Vancouver Island. Captain George Vancouver's words are an apt example of this idea, as he states

> I could not possibly believe any uncultivated country had ever been discovered exhibiting so rich a picture. Stately forests . . . pleasingly clothed its eminences and chequered its vallies; presenting in many places, extensive spaces that wore the appearance of having been cleared by art . . . [we]had no reason to imagine this country had ever been indebted for its decoration to the hand of man.[93]

Evidently, it was deeply imbued into the mind of European explorers that this land before them was uncultivated. This quote is ironic, as Vancouver can hardly believe that such a plentiful and abundant environment was rendered this way through some artistic grace alone. That is because it is unbelievable; It was not untouched land. Captain James Cook and John Meare's journals fueled these narratives as well, despite their complementary narrow view of how Indigenous peoples did occupy and use their land.[94] The encounters permeated an ethnocentric bias into much of the historiographical work done in this era. It continued to then attribute European influence to any evidence of plant cultivation that was noted by early fur-traders.[95]

Deur notes one American anthropologist, Ruth Benedict, who carried this line of thought through his work when he stated "Their civilization was built upon an ample supply of goods, inexhaustible, and obtained without expenditure of labour."[96] This quote from 1934 is significant as it plays into two different and dangerous stereotypes surrounding Indigenous land use: one, that they did not have to modify great swaths of their environment to support themselves, and two, that they did not perform arduous labour to do so. Labour soon became a tool through which Europeans could define other racial groups. For example, it allowed Indigenous peoples on Vancouver Island to be distinctly positioned

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[90] Douglas Deur and Nancy J. Turner, *Keeping it Living: Traditions of Plant Use and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America* (Washington: Washington University Press, 2006), 3.
[91] Deur and Turner, *Keeping it Living*, 3.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., 22.
[94] Ibid., 4.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid., 5.

against the character of Europeans, who were endlessly industrious.[97] This kind of historical work has also defined that Indigenous labour is unreliable and inconsistent.[98] However, from various other fur-trader reports of Indigenous behaviour, it becomes clear that this assumption stood on thin ice; they were often observed working long days harvesting their own food.[99] If these depictions are untrue, what is actually at work here is a European effort to define race, and to create an 'other' through this definition. In creating the image of an anti-labour Indigenous person who takes from the land what they need with little effort, Europeans began a process of creating and maintaining racial boundaries and definitions.[100]

In reality, many communities native to the Pacific Northwest employed vast agricultural measures to their land. Most notably, Indigenous peoples of Vancouver Island harvested camas, and to do so, required extensive burning and clearings.[101] They harvested many other edible plants in ways that required their direct intervention, an idea which clearly opposes European thought. Upwards of 300 species were utilised by those Indigenous to the Pacific Northwest for food, medicine, and clothing.[102] Though to fully acknowledge the legitimacy of these practices, European explorers, fur traders and settlers would have had to employ a non-Western lens onto these unrecognisable methods of agriculture, which was not extensively undertaken. What was undertaken was this effort to construct an early version of wilderness, one in which Europeans saw North America as a pristine and untouched stretch of land, and thus relatively unoccupied.[103] This idea becomes increasingly important as the focus shifts from interacting with Indigenous people for fur-trade purposes, to settling their land. These narratives surrounding Indigenous peoples thus become notable as they came to help justify colonial settlement of many areas which were already occupied, including Vancouver Island. These depictions of Indigenous people were advanced in cartographic and photographic material as well as treaty creation in the coming century.

The colonial settlement of Vancouver Island occurring in the mid 1800's meant that it was subject to an ethnographical phenomenon known as the "Vanishing Indian." One settler, photographer, and amateur anthropologist, George Dawson, is a clear example of how this theory played out in practice. The concept of the 'Vanishing Indian' encompassed the sentiment of colonial governments as well as settlers in the late 19th century that "the native peoples encountered in the course of … scientific surveying were in an irreversible state of decline and that their 'traditional' customs and material culture should be preserved through texts, photographs and museum-bound artefacts before they completely disappeared."[104] Dawson's photographs, and later ethnographies, of the Haida population thus fell within this trend of a European effort to capture Indigenous North Americans, which they perceived as wasting away.[105] His work culminated in a result like many European efforts to immortalise something that had not gone anywhere: it pre-emptively removed the Haida population from their land in the minds of settlers.[106] By removing Indigenous people from this imagined colonial geography, Dawson participated in justifying their erasure, and thus settler occupancy of this "empty" land. At this time, Indigenous populations were on the decline overall, which is accepted now to be because of exposure to disease brought by Europeans. But Dawson's work was not preoccupied with this reality. Instead, it functioned to legitimise British Columbia, Vancouver Island, and their surrounding territories as plentiful resourceful

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[97] John Lutz, "Making the Lazy Indian," in *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 33.
[98] Ibid., 36.
[99] Ibid., 34.
[100] Ibid., 36.
[101] Deur and Turner, *Keeping it Living*, 11.
[102] Ibid., 13.
[103] Ibid., 4.
[104] Jason Grek-Martin, "Vanishing the Haida: George Dawson's Ethnographic Vision and the Making of settler space on the Queen Charlotte Islands in the late Nineteenth Century," *The Canadian Geographer* 51, no.3 (Autumn 2007), 376.
[105] Ibid., 374.
[106] Ibid.

landscapes, which, without the burden of supporting their Indigenous people, were able to be settled by others.[107]

This cumulative lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous land usage allowed for European settlers, specifically James Douglas and his administration, to remove them from their land and carve out space for a growing settler population. In his work "Making Native Space; Colonialism, Resistance and Reserves in British Columbia," Cole Harris situates the creation of these colonial documents within a larger context of a governmental effort to create a settler-welcoming colony that aligned with British ideals. After the establishment of the colony of Vancouver Island in 1849, the colonial government held the assumption that Indigenous peoples did not have the ability to be assimilated.[108] Therefore, to promote settler security, which was of utmost importance, Indigenous peoples must be concretely suppressed.[109] The colonial office held very specific ideas of what constituted, among many things, land. Therefore, this question of how to handle the problem of Indigenous people on this new found land became of paramount importance.[110] There emerged from this a sense of settler anxiety around 'wasting' land. In their view, the perceived lack of land utilisation on the part of Indigenous groups took from their ability to support much larger numbers of settlers.[111] This feeling became clear in newspapers where writings would describe Indigenous peoples as an inferior race, and felt they had an obligation to turn this untouched "wilderness" into a more productive landscape.[112] As previously stated, this was not true. Indigenous peoples were making use of the land, simply in a way not overtly recognizable to the colonial administration. Nevertheless, the very presence of Indigenous people on this land seemed to burden the crown's sovereignty of this land.[113]

James Douglas had to ensure that the society he created did not pronounce Indigenous presence, but rather diminished it.[114] This is where the Douglas treaties become relevant. Beginning in 1850, these written and oral agreements were a proponent of this initiative to clear Indigenous presence from the settler imagination. For example, many of these treaties did define space for Indigenous villages and reserves, however, most Indigenous peoples lived in a way that did not equate to a European understanding of a village.[115] Here, the colonial language in these official documents obfuscated the ways in which Indigenous peoples took up space on Vancouver Island. To further this, the vast meadows which Indigenous people burned and used for camas harvesting were not able to be categorised properly under the language of "enclosed fields" that the government chose to use in some treaties, leaving ambiguity imbued in these texts.[116] Along with these treaties came the production of many colonial maps, which among records are distinct in their erasure of Indigenous presence.

As Historian J. B. Harley would say "maps constituted an important disciplinary technology of colonial power," which the colonial government of Vancouver Island fully accepted and utilised to their advantage.[117] Douglas' maps overlaid themselves in entirely arbitrary ways across well-established Indigenous territories. Their lines were not conducive to the expansive ways on which Indigenous peoples interacted with the land around them. When they confined Indigenous peoples to reserves and small village sites and later maps, they stripped them of their livelihoods, in what Jason Grek-Martin would call

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[107] Grek-Martin, "Vanishing the Haida," 378.
[108] Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 4.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid., 6.
[111] Ibid., 9.
[112] John Lutz, "Relating to the Country': The Lekwammen and the Extension of European Settlement, 1843-1911," in *Beyond the City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 18.
[113] Harris, *Making Native Space*, 17.
[114] Ibid., 24.
[115] Ibid., 25.
[116] Ibid., 26.
[117] J. B. Harley, "Deconstructing the Map" in *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 3.

"cartographic erasure."[118] The reason these maps held the amount of power they did lies again in Harley's analysis of mapping. Maps tend to carry a certain respect or legitimacy with them that is allowed for by their objective and scientific nature.[119] But, these colonial maps are far from objective, they simply carry the weight of the crown, of science, of measurement, and of writing behind them, which lend to their apparent superiority to Indigenous ways of knowing land.

On Vancouver Island there are many examples of such cartographic erasure. In fact, most colonial maps produced that predate the creation of reserves confined Indigenous presence to small black blocks that often represented their winter village sites.[120] They were seldom represented even by the name the colonial government had ascribed to them, such as the Songhees on the southern end of the Island.[121] This emerges as a trend within these maps, where Indigenous presence is confined to a fraction of the space we now know they occupied and utilised. Douglas himself produced maps that promoted similar ideas of Indigenous occupation. In his map of the southern region of Vancouver Island, there is no reference to the fields that existed for agricultural purposes by the Lekwammen people.[122] Much like other maps it confines their presence to small village sites. The precision of line and measurement of colonial property and land ownership comes into stark contrast with less structured Indigenous territories here. While not necessarily intentional, this certainly highlights the difference between how these colonial officials and cartographers conceptualised land in comparison to Indigenous peoples.[123] These maps also accentuate the relatively small and arbitrary spaces reserves afforded Indigenous groups within colonial Vancouver Island compared to, for example, public parks for settlers.[124] These seemingly small cartographic details held vast consequences for these communities.

Photographer E.S Curtis played a similar role in constructing the premature image of a "Vanishing Indian" into the social imaginations of settlers. To reach this construction, the settler imagination needed to expand its capacity to view far off and unfamiliar lands as manageable.[125] Both Dawson and Curtis were able to establish this capacity and thus facilitate the creation of an effective colony. Curtis's early photographs and Dawsons extensive ethnographic reports were especially effective. In particular, Dawson's reports on the Queen Charlotte Islands make barely any significant mention of the Haida occupancy of this space.[126] Curtis' photos in the early 20th century have much the same effect, supplying to the minds of settlers a visual representation of sweeping resource landscapes, with consistently primitive depictions of Indigenous peoples. These physical manifestations of colonial aspirations solidified them into reality.[127] Settler colonialism on Vancouver Island became justified through these kinds of documentary actions.

The question then becomes what effect these maps and other colonial paperwork could have had over Indigenous people in the past, as well as in the creation of this province as it developed. It was in this "assumed link between reality and representation" that maps gained their power.[128] The professional edge

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[118] Grek-Martin, "Vanishing the Haida," 379.
[119] Harley, "Deconstructing the Map," 3.
[120] "Plan of Victoria District Lot 24-Secn. 18," Land Title and Survey of British Columbia Maps, https://vault.library.uvic.ca/concern/generic_works/0e18a3f8-ee5c-44c2-918c-1adc84081d5e (17 October 2011); "Map of the City of Victoria, Vancouver Island [1863]," Land Title and Survey of British Columbia Maps, https://vault.library.uvic.ca/concern/generic_works/7afac2e2-146f-420a-bea0-f3d00c863bb0 (13 January 2011); "North Saanich," Land Title and Survey of British Columbia Maps, https://vault.library.uvic.ca/concern/generic_works/675e7fa7-7132-4ffe-b676-80dced2fd97f (22 October 2008).
[121] "Map of South-eastern Districts of Vancouver Island," Land Title and Survey of British Columbia Maps, https://vault.library.uvic.ca/concern/generic_works/c368470b-a2e5-4e2b-96fa-a601b2416201 (24 January 2012).
[122] Lutz, "Relating to the Country," 19.
[123] "Map of the City of Victoria, Vancouver Island [1863]," 13 January 2011.
[124] "Map of the south-eastern Districts of Vancouver Island," 24 January 2012.
[125] Grek-Martin, "Vanishing the Haida," 378.
[126] Ibid., 379.
[127] Ibid., 378.
[128] Harley, "Deconstructing the Map," 3.

they held allowed them to permeate the minds of settlers as fact. This created a depiction of Indigenous peoples as much smaller, and much more stereotypically primitive than truly existed. Harley suggests that the map can be understood as reflecting the true nature of things back to the observer, which certainly transpired in BC.[129] I will extend this analysis of maps to encompass photographs from men such as E.S Curtis and ethnographic reports like Dawson's. They all operate discreetly under a guise of neutrality and of objectivity which served to justify colonial settlement of Vancouver Island as well as its surrounding territories. Therefore, by pairing a cartographically miniscule representation of Indigenous populations with a social imagination of a 'lazy and disappearing Indian,' maps become a dangerous colonial tool in racialization and justifying white colonial settlement.

From fur-trade to colonial eras, markers and measurements were blanketed over Indigenous territory in response to an external need of the colony to legitimise their settlement and use of this 'unoccupied' land. Journals and ethnographies depicting Indigenous people created a Eurocentric and inaccurate representation of them, which was purposefully continued in the creation of official maps and photographs in the late 1800's. This framework created the necessary space in the settler imagination for the colony of Vancouver Island and eventually British Columbia to become seen as an expansive, pristine, and empty land ready for white occupation.

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[129] Harley, "Deconstructing the Map," 4.

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