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## MAKING CONNECTIONS

*Gender, Race, and Place in Oregon Country*

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IN AN ARRESTING IMAGE in *Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia Limerick suggests that the West has always been a “meeting ground of peoples.”<sup>1</sup> The early nineteenth-century Pacific Northwest was such a meeting ground. Home to three distinct native cultures that anthropologists today call the Northwest Coast, Plateau, and Great Basin peoples, by the 1820s the region was also the westernmost outpost of the British Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) fur-trade empire. Two decades later, it was the edenic agricultural destination of the American pioneers who made their way west on the Oregon Trail in the 1840s.

Oregon Country, as it was known, stretched from the Pacific Coast to the continental divide in what is now western Montana, and from the northern border of Mexican California to the southern boundary of Russian Alaska at 54° 40′. With the exception of this northern boundary, which is simply a line on a map, the other boundaries of Oregon Country roughly conformed to natural geographical contours. Oregon Country

was jointly occupied by the United States and Britain from 1818 to 1846, a situation unique in North American history. At first, joint occupancy worked because the region seemed remote and useless, but as the fur trade moved west across Canada and as the United States expanded its continental ambitions, Oregon Country became increasingly interesting to both nations. In the 1840s, uncertainty about the future status of the region created a situation in which all three resident groups—native peoples, European fur traders, and American farmers—vied for ascendancy. The political story of the struggle between the American settlers and Dr John McLoughlin, HBC chief factor at Fort Vancouver, has been told and retold,<sup>2</sup> but the social and cultural story of the encounters among the three groups has not. I want to look at the Oregon Country at this moment when the “meeting ground of peoples” was most obvious and to suggest new ways to look at region and regional identity that bring women and gender to the centers of these “meeting grounds.”

Environmental historian Donald Worster offers a deceptively simple description of how to think about the notion of region: “What the regional historian should first want to know is how a people or peoples acquired a place and, then, how they perceived and tried to make use of it.”<sup>3</sup> We know that perceptions and usages are gendered; we also need to understand that they are not solely individual. Worster speaks of “a people or peoples” who were implicitly connected to each other by kinship or by a common outlook. The significance of these networks has been clearly articulated by Montana writer Deirdre McNamer: “I never set out to deliberately de-mythologize the West but...when you try to make your characters real and layered and tied to other lives in other places—your work has the inevitable effect of dismantling the myth of the West as the home of heroic, loner white guys moving through an unpeopled and uncomplicated place.”<sup>4</sup> McNamer’s comment adds to Worster’s definition the recognition that people do not exist alone but in social networks, and that we must take the various forms of these networks into account as we consider their experience on a particular “meeting ground,”<sup>5</sup> just as we consider the factors of race, gender, and nationality. Armed with these insights, we can ask, “How did people live in this place—Oregon Country—and how did they perceive it?”

Beginning, as we always should, with indigenous peoples, one is immediately struck by their variety and the perils of generalization. Nevertheless, whether speaking of the indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast, the Columbia Plateau, or the Great Basin, we can recognize everywhere the importance of deep collective ties to their particular homelands. There were good reasons for this. Because each people derived all their food and shelter from it, where they lived was the most important fact of their lives, equaled only by the importance of their kin group, for no single person could survive long alone. How the group as a whole made use of its environment determined the survival of everyone. Thus the coastal Indians like the Tillamook in the south and the Tlingit in the north lived off the richness of the sea, supplemented by greens and berries gathered in the summers. Many coastal peoples were impressive seafarers, who often traveled long distances in huge ocean-going canoes. In the vast inland drainage area of the Columbia River, Plateau tribes like the Chinook and the Yakama who lived along the river depended on salmon, augmented by roots, berries, and hunting; groups situated in the interior of the territory, like the Okanagan, gathered and hunted more intensively. To the south and east, aboriginal peoples in the Great Basin, like the Shoshone, hunted and gathered, surviving in apparently inhospitable arid terrain.

The environment affected social structure directly. Some coastal groups, like the Tsimshian and Haida, were famously rich, trading with and raiding other groups for slaves who remained a permanent, hereditary subgroup of the capturing tribe. Because the environment was so rich in food, slavery allowed coastal peoples to devote their energies to creating an elaborate and stratified social structure, a rich ceremonial life, and elaborate arts. Other native peoples on less hospitable terrain were more egalitarian foragers who devoted almost all of their efforts to food gathering; one such tribe, the North Paiutes of the Great Basin, appeared to be so incessant in their gathering of roots and berries that Americans derisively called them “Diggers.”<sup>6</sup>

Familiarity with the land was gendered in obvious ways. Male hunters knew certain territories and the behavior of the animals that populated them, and male fishermen knew the ways of the salmon that

made their way up the rivers. Women knew how to fillet and dry the salmon and other fish, and they knew where to dig and gather the roots and berries that could provide 60 per cent of the group's diet. Each sex respected the expertise of the other; their knowledges were complementary, they would have said, and both essential to the whole. Or at least this was the ideal. Of course, real life was much more complicated, and every indigenous group made its own adjustments based upon the environment, circumstances, and individual personalities. But the gendered division of labor, and the gendered expertise that sustained it, remained a basic aspect of indigenous life.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship that each group had with the land went beyond detailed geographic familiarity. Their tie to place was spiritual and collective. Each particular North American Indian group identified itself and its place by telling stories about physical landmarks, animals, and other local phenomena. The Nez Perce of present-day northern Idaho still point to the rock they call "the heart of the monster" and tell the story of how Coyote bested him. The Clallum people, on the other hand, tell a tale that describes Mount St Helens as Loo-wit, a beautiful woman who turned herself into a mountain to escape the courtship of two jealous chiefs, Wyeast, now Mount Hood, and Klickitat, who became Mount Adams. Even after they became mountains, the chiefs continued to quarrel: "They caused sheets of flame to burst forth, and they hurled hot rocks at each other." (It seems that Loo-wit got the last word when she "blew her top" in 1980!) These stories about specific places—these ties—were constantly being remade as the stories were passed from one generation to the next or when told to the group on special occasions. Storytelling, too, was gendered: male leaders told or performed stories at ceremonial gatherings, while grandmothers told stories to their grandchildren informally. Everyone knew these stories, and they also knew the appropriate circumstances in which to tell them and, in the telling, to call up the group history of the place. Thus these places, and these stories, were alive with both collective and personal meanings. As Native American poet and writer Leslie Marmon Silko explains, "This perspective on narrative—of story within story, the idea that one story is only the beginning

of many stories and the sense that stories never truly end—represents an important contribution of Native American cultures to the English language.”<sup>9</sup> By entering the story, one simultaneously entered into a collective and ongoing connection with place. This was the powerful connection between oral tradition and the aboriginal link to the homeland. These ties—living, renewable expressions of group and individual consciousness—were at the heart of indigenous life.

Most native peoples spent their lives within their known tribal areas, simply because that was where their livelihood and kin were. Trading and raiding were the major exceptions. Coastal peoples traveled far to trade with others and to raid for captives to augment their supply of slaves. Women were prominent in both activities: they were sharp and shrewd traders, and they were also the most likely captives of male raiding parties. Plateau and Great Basin peoples had customary seasonal rounds of gathering and hunting. Once horses became available in the 1720s, Plateau groups like the Nez Perce made yearly trips over the Rocky Mountains to hunt buffalo and fight, when necessary, with more eastern tribes, such as the Blackfoot, who objected to incursions into their territory. Some Great Basin groups, such as the Shoshone, became full-time buffalo hunters themselves. In addition, there were recognized trade rendezvous points, the greatest of which was at Ceililo Falls on the Columbia River, which drew peoples and goods from far along the Pacific Coast and from as far as 1,000 miles [1,609 km] inland.<sup>10</sup>

As far as we know, until European contact, indigenous peoples did not have a concept of race: that is, of another, essentially different kind of human. They certainly recognized, however, different cultures, and they had to decide whether or not to treat other groups as potential kin or as foes. Communication among groups led to some blurring of tribal lines, for there was considerable intermarriage, especially among Plateau peoples—so much so that one anthropologist described the region as a “vast kinship web.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps we can postulate that the people within this kinship web had a shared sense of regional identity, but this may be an inappropriately modern concept. We do know that widespread kinship ties facilitated the spread of European diseases. The first smallpox

epidemic reached the region in the 1770s, carried by trade networks long before any physical European presence; the second outbreak occurred in 1802. Combined, these two epidemics are estimated to have killed at least half of the indigenous population.<sup>12</sup> Thus kinship, a fundamental pillar of native life, was weakened. With vastly reduced numbers, their use of the land must have changed as well.

Nevertheless, ties to place survived the first period of white-indigenous contact during the fur trade that dominated western North America until the 1840s. In the vast sweep of territory called Rupert's Land, in what is now western Canada, indigenous ways of life and connections to the land survived because the European fur trade depended on native people; traders did not deliberately or directly challenge aboriginal peoples, nor did they force them to leave their traditional homelands. This does not mean that Europeans did not racialize native peoples. As Alexandra Harmon points out in her insightful study of cultural contacts in the Puget Sound area, *Indians in the Making*, Europeans used the generic term *Indian* to refer to all the groups they encountered and relied on the general strategies for dealing with them that had developed over the two-century span of the fur trade. Although not unaware of cultural differences among aboriginal groups, fur traders rarely paid much attention to the details unless they affected trade itself.<sup>13</sup>

The fur trappers and traders associated with the British and Canadian fur trade were the second distinct group to enter Oregon Country in the first decade of the nineteenth century. The most striking fact about these fur traders was the arrangement they made with native peoples, which rested on sexual and familial relationships between European traders and native women. European men deliberately used marriage with native women as a means to gain entry into the indigenous group with whom they traded. By entering into marriage alliances on native terms, the traders accommodated themselves to indigenous cultures and customs, not the other way around. Sylvia Van Kirk insists that these marriages, "after the fashion of the country," were "*the fundamental social relationship* through which a fur trade society developed."<sup>14</sup> Here is a striking example of a gendered cross-racial social network—a

connection—that persisted over time because it served the needs of both parties. Practiced over several generations, these marriages created not only cross-racial kinship links, but a distinctive, mixed-race people, the Métis, who formed their own communities in the Red River settlement in present-day Manitoba and elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

The Hudson’s Bay Company became a major force in Oregon Country in 1824, when Dr John McLoughlin was put in charge of what the HBC called the Columbia District. Establishing Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River (near present-day Portland) as his base in 1825, McLoughlin remained in charge of the district until 1845. From Fort Vancouver he directed fur brigades that operated from San Francisco Bay north to the border of Russian Alaska, for the district the HBC called New Caledonia (present-day British Columbia) was soon added to McLoughlin’s command. In other words, all of Oregon Country was in his purview. McLoughlin was not a settler. He was a trader and exploiter. He viewed the land primarily in terms of its fur-bearing capacity. This required, McLoughlin asserted, being on good terms with the indigenous groups of the region. He explained, “We trade furs, [and] none can hunt fur bearing animals[,] or afford to sell them cheaper, than Indians. It is therefore clearly our interest, as it is unquestionably our duty, to be on good terms with them... particularly when the disparity of numbers is so great as to show but one white man to 200 Indians.”<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the fur trade, McLoughlin was deeply involved in agriculture, an occupation usually associated with permanent settlement. However, McLoughlin’s initial aim was simple survival: Fort Vancouver could not survive on the uncertain food supply that was supposed to come on the once-yearly ship from England. McLoughlin established at Fort Vancouver, and later at Cowlitz and other fur posts, extensive farming and dairying operations that provisioned all the HBC employees and, after 1839, the Russian America Company in Sitka, Alaska, as well. He also created a brisk trade in lumber and foodstuffs with Hawai‘i. McLoughlin, a trader to his core, moved rapidly from subsistence to commercial agriculture, and he achieved this on a scale not to be matched in the region until the twentieth century. In 1839, there were 1,200 acres

under cultivation, producing wheat, oats, barley, peas, potatoes, other vegetables, and fruits; additional acreage provided pasture for cattle, pigs, and sheep. Historian James Gibson says that the agricultural workforce was composed of natives, Hawai'ians, and French Canadians, but he does not specify their gender. Because the fort produced large quantities of butter and cheese, we can speculate that some employees were women. The British regarded dairying as women's work, even though the effort to import a British woman as dairy manager failed. She disapproved of mixed-race marriages and insisted on returning to England.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, except for the brief sojourns of the dairy manager and of the equally disapproving wife of a British clergyman, all the women at Fort Vancouver were native or Métis. In 1845, most of the approximately 200 male HBC "servants," themselves a mixture of Indian, French-Canadian, Métis, and Hawai'ians, were married "after the fashion of the country" to native women. The majority of the women were coastal Chinook (a number of whom brought their slaves with them), while the rest were from other coastal or plateau tribes. We can assume that these women (and, or, their slaves) worked alongside their husbands in the fur trade, and perhaps in agriculture, although HBC officials regarded natives as "lazy" workers.<sup>18</sup>

Marguerite McLoughlin and Amelia Douglas, wives, respectively, of the Chief Factor and his assistant, James Douglas, were Métis. Their lives, although luxurious by local standards, were much more restricted than those of the native women who clustered around Fort Vancouver. The male-dominated fur trade was organized in military fashion, with strict discipline and rigid adherence to rank and status, complemented by homosocial male rituals, a prime example of which was the all-male officers mess. An 1839 visitor, Thomas Farnham, left us a vivid word portrait of McLoughlin standing at the twenty-foot [six meter] table in the Big House, "directing the gentlemen and guests to their places according to rank," while his wife and children, who also lived in the house, remained secluded. Indeed, Marguerite McLoughlin, Amelia Douglas, and their female children seem to have spent most of their time in seclusion, except when horseback riding, at which both women excelled.<sup>19</sup>

Aside from this limitation, the most serious concern of these elite Métis women must have been the future of their children. Although fathers in these elite fur-trade marriages often arranged extensive and expensive schooling for their sons, Sylvia Van Kirk argues elsewhere in this volume that Métis daughters, not sons, had a greater likelihood of operating effectively in white society. Perhaps this was true because racial categories tightened with the advent of white settlers, who were excluded from Rupert's Land until the 1830s. But it seems equally plausible that marriage, "after the fashion of the country," which had begun in mutuality, was reshaped over time at the elite level to serve the needs of the British officer ranks. Métis daughters of HBC officials were obvious partners for the young European men who made up the officer class, and they were trained by their native or Métis mothers for this position.<sup>20</sup> But British officers moving into the territory did not bring daughters with them, nor would they have happily married them to Métis men. Race and gender operated within a class system that privileged the social, sexual, and material desires of white men.

The Hudson's Bay Company was a far-flung but closely-knit social network. It appears that the identification of officers and "servants" was not grounded in a particular place but in the trade itself, which functioned by ignoring racial distinctions that prevailed elsewhere. But while these distinctions were ignored within the trade, the racial assumptions of the Imperial homelands were not transformed. Nothing showed the distinctiveness of the HBC more than the dilemma officers faced when they retired: they could choose to retire to Montreal or to England, but because of European racial prejudice, they could not comfortably bring their Métis wives and children with them. Some men abandoned their "country" families, but a surprising number, John McLoughlin among them, retired where they were. McLoughlin, who retired in 1845, was following the example of a number of former HBC employees who, with their Indian wives, were the first settlers in the agriculturally rich Willamette Valley of Oregon in the 1820s. Here, then, was a multiracial social network of men, linked by kinship and common work histories, who chose in retirement to become settlers—subsistence farmers—in a

favorable location. McLoughlin himself, true to his trader background, opened a store.

The third players in the Northwest “meeting ground of peoples” were Americans. Methodist missionary Jason Lee arrived in the Willamette Valley in 1834, and although he did little farming and even less missionary work, he did play a major role in publicizing the agricultural potential of the valley to Americans. In the 1830s other missionaries arrived, the most famous of whom were Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, who settled near present-day Walla Walla. They, too, struggled as missionaries, and gradually diverted most of their attention into recruiting American settlers to the region.<sup>21</sup>

American settlers began to arrive in numbers via the Oregon Trail in the early 1840s—100 in 1842, over 900 in 1843, and even more in the years to follow. These people differed markedly from the HBC officers and servants: they were family groups, they were farmers, and they intended to stay. Many were instantly suspicious of McLoughlin, for he represented Britain, against whom many Americans harbored colonial resentments dating back to the Revolutionary War. In reality, many settlers owed their survival to him, for as the exhausted and desperate condition of the pioneers became apparent, McLoughlin began the yearly practice of sending rescue parties back along the trail, providing boats for the trip down the Columbia River from The Dalles to Portland, and providing food, medical treatment, and temporary employment once they arrived at Fort Vancouver.<sup>22</sup>

The epic journey over the 2,000-mile [3,219 km] long Oregon Trail has been described, analyzed, and explained at length by many historians, but in the end a mystery still remains: why did so many ill-prepared people undertake such a dangerous journey?<sup>23</sup> In the early years, the journey west on the Oregon Trail was a much more terrible ordeal than upbeat retrospective accounts have led us to believe. At least in the early years, those who arrived in Oregon were stripped of their material wealth, their physical health, and their emotional reserves.<sup>24</sup> Families were fortunate to survive the journey without the death of at least one relative. Humans are resilient and most people recovered in time, but it

may be that the very difficulty of their journey led the American pioneers (as they called themselves) to stake their claim to the land—still jointly occupied by Britain and the United States—with special fierceness.

In his memoir *Traplins*, Idaho writer John Rember describes how his family claimed their land by deliberately obliterating traces of earlier occupation, marking it as their own, as if to insist that they were the first to live there. Much later, Rember tried to reconstruct the lives of the family that had lived there previously, only to be defeated by his own family's successful efforts at obliteration.<sup>25</sup> There is a metaphor here: the Oregon Trail pioneers, the Johnny-come-latelies to the Northwest, asserted their claim with particular vehemence, and they prevailed in part because of sheer numbers and in part because of diplomatic determinations decided far from Oregon. Much to the disappointment of McLoughlin and other HBC officers, who had hoped for a division at the Columbia River, the boundary was set at the 49th parallel, with a dip to allow British occupation of Vancouver Island and to provide access to Puget Sound. The HBC formally transferred the headquarters of its Northwest operations to Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island, and it appointed James Douglas, McLoughlin's long-time assistant, to head it. By 1850, the HBC's control over the lower half of what had been Oregon Country was over.

The group that suffered most as a result of this changeover was not the HBC, but the local indigenous groups with whom the HBC had always cultivated friendly relations. The American settlers had no such sociable inclinations. Most Americans had been taught to be both suspicious and contemptuous of "Indians," although few had ever had much contact with them until their overland journey.<sup>26</sup> At first there were few problems, because the tribes that occupied the Willamette Valley had been so devastated by disease that they could not resist white occupation. But the larger and stronger tribes to the East—the Cayuse, the Yakama, the Nez Perce—were increasingly alarmed at the size of the annual Oregon Trail migrations. These fears, coupled with their anger over the differential effects of disease—whites sickened but survived, while natives died—exploded in the killing of the Whitmans and thirteen others by

Cayuse Indians in 1847. In the American retribution that followed, the Cayuse were the first native group in Oregon Country to be formally deprived of all of their land, which was promptly opened for white settlement.<sup>27</sup> Separation from the land, or confinement to only a small portion of the traditional homeland, was to be the fate of all of Oregon Country's surviving native groups. Throughout the region, sporadic warfare, much of it vicious, occurred from 1847 to 1877 as different tribal groups tried desperately to resist white encroachment.<sup>28</sup> Devastated by disease, often separated from their lands and traditional livelihoods, native peoples were regarded as inferior by whites and were subjected to relentless pressure to conform to European cultural standards rather than their own.<sup>29</sup> North and south of the new border, it was official and deliberate policy, in the name of "civilization," to deprive indigenous peoples of their identities, which had once been so firmly rooted in kinship and place. A racial border between whites and Indians existed that had not been there before.

The Oregon Trail pioneers were primarily farmers: they had a passion—indeed, one might say a greed—for land that made them markedly different from those who had lived in the region before them. Many genuinely believed that the nomadic ways of the "Indians" (as they generically called them) represented an improper use of land that ought properly to be owned and cultivated.<sup>30</sup> Yet historian Peter Boag cautions us not to view these early settlers simply as rapacious conquerors. In his environmental study of pioneers in a part of the Willamette Valley, Boag highlights an enlightening contrast: while nomadic Indians obtained what they needed from many ecosystems, the settled nature of Euro-American agriculture required settlers to search with "painstaking" care for a single piece of land that would supply wood and water, grazing land for stock, and well-drained land for crops. Although settlers were attracted to the broad valley bottoms of the area, they rapidly discovered that this land was too wet to farm without drainage. They therefore chose drier land at the base of the foothills, where their basic needs could be met. As Boag says, "In daily activities...earliest settlers developed an intimate connection with the foothills, though they also looked to the plains as the future."<sup>31</sup>

At the very moment when settlers were adjusting to a new climate and new land conditions, they were already planning ahead to the broad pastoral plains of the future, once they had the time and resources to begin draining the bottomland. Boag tells us that within fifty years the goal was achieved: the foothills were left behind, and large farms, communities, industries, infrastructure, and connections with the wider world were established on the plains. With this shift, he says, came a change of attitude: “The settlers had once considered the landscape to be in some ways separate from humans, and in many ways something on which humans depended; over time, though, the landscape increasingly became just the object of utilitarian desires and economic demand.”<sup>32</sup> American settlers began, then, in a state of dependence on nature not so different from that of the natives they displaced, although in the settlers’ case much more shallowly rooted because so recent. But because they brought with them a pastoral vision of the land, the settlers worked hard to create that vision, and in so doing they came to believe they had control over the land.

If there were ever a group of people whose “lives were tied to other lives in other places,” to use McNamer’s phrase, it was these migrants. Tied by kinship and custom to the places they left behind, migrants brought their old ways to their new homes, where they faced the challenge of adapting old practices to new circumstances. As much as possible, they tried to replicate old ways rather than invent new ones. The Oregon pioneers followed this rule in agriculture and elsewhere. It is no surprise to learn, then, that the first provisional government set up by settlers in 1843 was modeled on laws found in *Organic Laws of the State of Iowa*, the one law book the settlers had brought with them.<sup>33</sup>

It may be more surprising to learn that Oregon pioneers followed the most common pattern of migration, known as chain migration, in which people move to join kin or members of their original communities. Most people assume that the celebrated Oregon Trail migrants of the 1840s were individuals or nuclear families. They are mistaken. Lillian Schlissel, in *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*,<sup>34</sup> points to evidence of many multigenerational families in the Oregon migration. William Bowen’s demographic study of early settlement, *The Willamette*

*Valley*, confirms Schlissel's observation. Bowen's careful study of the 1850 census shows a clear pattern of "clustering" in rural neighborhoods based on kinship or place of origin. Even with the sketchy sources available, Bowen found that at least 45 per cent of Willamette Valley households had blood ties in 1850. Bowen claimed that other social ties—religious, fraternal, business, neighborhood ties—all of which he terms "clan" relationships, were also present and significant. Bowen's estimate is almost certainly low, because there is no means, based on the census alone, to identify kinship ties between sisters who took different last names when they married. Nevertheless, from the census data Bowen was able to clearly distinguish two kinds of settlement: "one, a rural frontier characterized by clans of westerners; the other, an urban frontier drawing its members disproportionately from the ranks of unmarried men from the Northeast or abroad."<sup>35</sup>

Just as had been true on earlier frontiers and in the fur trade, this demographic pattern meant that the quickest way for an unmarried man to get ahead was to marry the daughter of an established family, thereby gaining access to the family network.<sup>36</sup> Fundamentally, then, just as marriage "according to the custom of the country" was the basic institution of the fur trade, so too did marriage knit the pioneers into community in the Oregon of the 1840s. The vital connection of marriage was epitomized by a novel land policy: the 1850 Donation Land Claim Act, which confirmed the land use policies informally in use since the early 1840s. Preceding the Homestead Act by twelve years, the Donation Land Law was the first U.S. law to offer settlers free land—and lots of it. Every white male citizen over the age of 18 who had arrived in Oregon before December 1, 1851 (later extended to 1855) could claim 320 acres for himself; remarkably, his wife could claim another 320 acres in her own name. By the time the law expired in 1855 nearly 7,500 successful claims to 2.5 million acres of land (which required residence on the land and cultivation for four years) had been filed.<sup>37</sup>

There were several novel aspects of the Donation Land Claim Act. First, contrary to official policy, it confirmed the homestead claims of the pioneers before the U.S. government signed any Indian treaties. Second, the law established whiteness as the norm: only white male

citizens and their wives could claim land, thereby excluding native, black, and Hawai'ian men from doing so; in a shrewd political concession, however, the law allowed retired HBC employees, including Métis men, to claim land if they renounced their British citizenship. Third, the law made a direct link between legally-recognized marriage and land ownership. It excluded all marriages that existed “according to the custom of the country” and other, looser forms of sexual relationships that were still common between European men and native women throughout Oregon Country. By demanding a marriage certificate, the law made European-style marriage, almost always between two white people, the norm. Thus it was a crucial tool in replicating American norms on what was now American soil.

Finally, the period of the Donation Land Law's enactment was the only period in the history of U.S. land law when married women were able to claim land in their own name. The later, more famous, Homestead Act allowed single women and widows to file, but not married women. Historians have tended to favor the sentimental explanation that lawmakers wished to acknowledge the role women had played in the Oregon migration, but the truth is surely more prosaic. By restricting the claim to married women, the Donation Land Law had the effect of increasing the “family” (read male) claim to land without increasing female autonomy. In fact, anecdotal evidence indicates the law caused a spate of marriages between adult males and girls as young as twelve or thirteen. The unbalanced sex ratio would have put pressure on young women in any case; whether or not this pressure was exacerbated by the Donation Land Law has not been studied by demographers.<sup>38</sup>

How did the pioneers come to think of Oregon as home? While it is certainly true that the Oregon Trail settlers regarded their very presence as proof that Oregon should belong to the United States, it took longer—perhaps several generations—for a sense of personal connection to establish itself and to create a genuine sense of regional identity. That personal connection was based, more than anything else, on familiarity with the geographic and natural characteristics of the particular place. But regional identification goes beyond this to include a sense of congruity with the ways of similar people with whom one shares a place.

The Oregon Trail pioneers achieved that sense of congruity rapidly, by sheer force of numbers and by establishing familiar institutions and legal forms, all aided by vociferous American nationalism. In the process they displaced and racialized the indigenous people, and they allowed themselves to imagine a “white” community that ignored the continuing reality of cross-race sexual relationships throughout the rest of the nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup>

In the northern part of Oregon Country, regional identity was harder to achieve, and a very different history followed. The region that we now know as British Columbia began as a fur-trade society, which was destabilized by the Fraser River gold rush of 1858. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, it remained an uneasy hybrid of miners and traders, with a racially mixed population on whom British authorities sought to impose the patterns and behaviors of a white settler society.<sup>40</sup>

Under the direction of Chief Factor James Douglas, after 1848 the HBC reconstituted its headquarters at Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island, re-established its agricultural enterprises, and provided a locus around which retired company “servants” could settle—while all the while continuing to direct the fur brigades that pursued their trade throughout the New Caledonia region. The census of 1855 showed the success of these efforts, recording 200 non-native inhabitants of the fort and village, 350 on nearby farms, and another 150 in the settlement of Nanaimo. With the exception of a few occupants of HBC fur forts, there were no Europeans on the mainland; there were, however, between 300,000 to 400,000 native inhabitants.<sup>41</sup>

This was the customary fur-trade situation: vastly outnumbered by the native population, HBC officials limited their contact with them to trade and did not interfere in tribal affairs. Personal behavior common to the fur trade continued: European men continued the practice of making marriages with native women “according to the custom of the country.” The “society” that grew up around Fort Victoria was led by a fur-trade elite made up of European men and their Métis wives and children. But in the 1850s, the vocal presence of British missionaries and other “civilizers” injected a new note of race consciousness, and elite Métis children became subject to special scrutiny. As Sylvia Van Kirk’s

article in this volume shows, all Métis daughters survived this scrutiny and married European men. But Métis sons, whom their fathers had sought to educate to become professional men, failed to join the white elite. In subsequent generations, the color bar was raised further, and the elite of the territory became all white (or claimed they were). This result conforms to a worldwide colonial pattern recently discerned by feminist scholars. As Ann Stoler explains, “it was not the progeny of [mixed race] unions who were problematic, but the possibility that they might be recognized as legitimate heirs to a European inheritance.”<sup>42</sup> Because under British law women could neither inherit nor own property, female Métis progeny were acceptable in ways that their brothers were not. At the same time, another double standard continued to flourish: native women were objects of sexual desire for European men, while the reverse, the potential for native men to be sexual partners for European women, was impermissible.

In 1858 the fur-trade society was overwhelmed when gold was discovered along the Fraser River. Within a year, the mainland population had swelled to 30,000, composed largely of American men. The Fraser River gold rush reverberated throughout the region that had made up the undivided Oregon Country. Large armed parties of men traveled overland through parts of what is now eastern Washington and British Columbia on their way to the Fraser River mining camps. These would-be miners were imbued with what Daniel Marshall calls the “California mining culture,” comprising equally the desire for gold and hostility toward native peoples. As these overland parties moved north, they often shot natives on sight and raided native villages for food, thereby provoking the Indian wars of 1858 in Washington Territory and the miner-native skirmishes known as the Fraser River War of the same year.<sup>43</sup> In the Fraser River, Marshall claims the ultimate result was “a typical California landscape segregated by race and ethnicity, an extension of the American West, and one in which native peoples were quickly compartmentalized and reduced to a matrix of Indian reserves.”<sup>44</sup>

We must question whether the violence unleashed by the miners during the California gold rush can be attributed solely to their nationality or to the California location. It is more plausible to look to their

actions rather than their national origin as a cause. After all, gold mining was the ultimate extractive industry: miners did not care about the land, only about the gold it might contain, and everywhere in the world that gold miners gathered, they left damaged landscapes and tailings behind. Although individual miners might live in tidy houses and plant gardens, the sheer numbers involved in gold rushes damaged the land and overwhelmed native populations, usually violently. This gold rush result was a worldwide phenomenon and cannot be blamed solely on the California gold rush and, or, American propensities toward violence.<sup>45</sup>

The miners' nationality notwithstanding, missionaries and other British spokesmen regarded the homosocial culture of the large groups of male miners clustered along the lower Fraser River and further north, at Cariboo, with deep suspicion. It was not natural, they argued, for so many men to live without the influence of good women—for indeed, almost all the women in the mining camps were prostitutes. Territorial authorities were doubtless greatly relieved when the mines played out in the 1860s and most of the miners returned to the United States or moved on to gold strikes elsewhere.<sup>46</sup>

What worried British officials in 1858 was the ease with which American miners crossed the border. In reality, many of the miners were recent Cornish, Scottish, or Irish immigrants to the United States, and they scarcely regarded themselves as “American.” They were just following the gold. Nevertheless, fearing the possibility of American annexation, the British government moved quickly to create the British colony of British Columbia, uniting Vancouver Island and the mainland under the governorship of James Douglas, who retired from the HBC to take the position.<sup>47</sup> Thus in a political sense, the European inhabitants of the new British Columbia found their initial regional identity in a determination not to be American. In a social sense, the gold rush upset the equilibrium of fur-trade society and forced the authorities to consider other ways to make British Columbia viable. Their answers were deeply gendered.

One solution was to find ways to control the native population, which, although decimated by disease, was much larger than the number of

Europeans or Americans. British authorities granted missionaries and Indian agents authority to reshape native life. Marriage was an institution of great interest to them. Not only did missionaries regard customary HBC marriages “according to the custom of the country” as illicit, they insisted that all unions, native as well as mixed-race, conform to European standards of monogamy and longevity.<sup>48</sup> The missionaries correctly believed that the terms of marriage represented particular kinds of gender relations, and they were determined that those terms would be European rather than native. We might call it marriage “*not* according to the custom of the country.” This attack on native gender relations may be taken to symbolize the end of the fur-trade era and the beginnings of full-blown colonialism. The effects of this policy were to discourage interracial marriage and to segregate the native population. As Adele Perry explains, as long as European and native populations were joined in marriage or in short-term sexual liaisons, “imperial visions of orderly, white communities buttressed by distant and quiescent First Nations populations” remained out of reach.<sup>49</sup>

What missionary efforts did *not* do, at least initially, was to curb the migrations of native peoples across the international border. John Lutz tells us that beginning in the 1850s, coastal peoples from as far north as the Tlingit, in the Alaskan panhandle, to those in the south on Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland began the practice of annual migrations to Victoria, the lower Fraser Valley, and to Puget Sound. They went for a reason new to them: wage work—the men worked in the mills, the women as domestic servants or as sex trade workers, often cohabiting with white men for the summer, and then returning to their homelands in the fall. But they also migrated for traditional reasons, namely to gather wealth and slaves to continue their customary potlatches. Lutz estimates that in 1885, as many as six thousand native people made the annual migration to Puget Sound.<sup>50</sup>

Here, then, is a significant rationale for the massive missionary interference in native cultures: the prohibition of the potlatch and other native customs was regarded as the only way to force “Canadian Indians” to stay at home. Missionaries and Indian agents imposed European

cultural standards in an effort to shape the regional identity of British Columbia, but other steps seemed to be necessary.

The continuing dilemma of British Columbia was plain: there simply were not enough permanent European settlers to control the native people or to discourage American annexation schemes. First the HBC, and later the British Government, attempted to attract settlers, but other places (including the U.S. Pacific Northwest, with more generous land policies) were more attractive. Finally, it was decided to import white women from England to remedy both the gender imbalance in England, where women were a majority, and that of British Columbia, where white men vastly outnumbered white women. Four times between 1859 and 1870, “assisted immigration” of white British women occurred; in all, about one hundred women arrived in British Columbia via “brideships,” as they are known in British Columbian lore. As was true of a similar female immigration scheme in Washington Territory—the “Mercer’s Belles”—the motives and character of these immigrating women were the subject of much media attention and titillation, and in the larger scheme of things their scant numbers made little difference.<sup>51</sup> But symbolically their presence made a huge difference in British Columbia, for, as Anne McClintock puts it, these women became the “boundary markers of empire” between the minority white and majority native populations.<sup>52</sup>

The importation of white women signified the determination of British authorities to segregate the white and native populations and especially to discourage the growth of the mixed-race population that had resulted from earlier relationships between white men and native women. In the heyday of the fur trade at Fort Vancouver in the 1830s, the aversion of the British dairy manager and the minister’s wife, mentioned earlier, to mixed-race marriages had been unwelcome, and they left in a huff; thirty years later the importation of white women symbolized the determination of British authorities to create a white settler society in spite of the numerical predominance of Native peoples. Finally, in the 1890s, successful efforts to encourage migration from England tipped the cultural balance of the province and established the dominance of

British customs and institutions that remain to this day. At the time, proponents of immigration saw it as a means to prevent an American effort to annex the province. Today, exercising those same British customs (paying for an elaborate high tea at the Empress Hotel in Victoria, for example) is touted as a means to attract American tourist dollars north of the border.<sup>53</sup>

How did these British immigrants come to feel at home in British Columbia? With difficulty. British Columbia author Ethel Wilson, well known for her insights, spelled out the emotional aspects that historians sometimes overlook. Wilson regarded developing an attachment to a known landscape as a vital way for lonely newcomers to begin to feel at home. In her novel *Swamp Angel*, published in 1954, Wilson deeply embedded her human story within the patterns of the natural world—the migration of birds, the swimming of fishes—to make her point about cosmic connections.<sup>54</sup> As her heroine builds a “fictive” family to replace the one she has lost, she comes to realize that life—human and animal—is a “web” of relationships, of which she is part. That Wilson means the web to be inclusive is shown by the presence of a young Chinese boy in the fictive family, but there are no native people in the story. And even the heroine’s heartfelt connection to the natural world does not make her relationships with other humans less difficult. Wilson’s emphasis on the natural world helps us to see that all migrations begin in strangeness and loneliness and move toward a search for connection with the new place. Personal connection with a place—to its geography, its flora and fauna, its remembered associations with human events—can run very deep and may not vary much from individual to individual. But the social connections, their breadth or narrowness, their traditionality or innovation, can vary enormously.

In the preceding pages I have focused on a particular time period, the early nineteenth century, and on a moment of dramatic transition. Following Worster’s lead (“what the regional historian should first want to know”), I have shown how fur-trade culture at first accommodated native cultures, only to be swamped by American settlers in the lands south of the 49th parallel. North of the new border, the slower transition

of British Columbia's fur-trade society into a properly British settler society clearly shows the steps by which a native population was segregated from white culture and dispossessed of their lands, although not fully controlled. I have also shown, following Adele Perry, the ways in which "gender is key in charting the particular trajectories of local colonial projects."<sup>55</sup> The resulting story is very different from that customarily offered in regional textbooks, and to my mind a much richer one, for it tells us how ordinary people, not their governments, made a new place their home. Coming to Oregon Country as members of pre-existing social networks, different groups frequently—and deliberately—destroyed older networks and peoples to forge new regional identities, that is, connections to each other and to the land.

#### NOTES

1. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987).
2. For the historiography, see Chad Reimer, "Borders of the Past: The Oregon Boundary Dispute and the Beginnings of Northwest Historiography," in *Parallel Destinies: Canadian-American Relations West of the Rockies*, ed. John M. Findlay and Ken S. Coates (Seattle: Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest in association with University of Washington Press; Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 221–45.
3. Donald Worster, "New West, True West: Interpreting the Region's History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1987): 149.
4. Deirdre McNamer, "Comment," *Aunties Newsletter* (Spokane, WA: Aunties Bookstore, 1996).
5. For an example of the many ways social networks interact with race and gender, see Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage, eds., *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).
6. For much fuller information about specific indigenous groups, see William C. Studevant, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), especially vols. 7, 11, and 12.
7. See, for example, the gendered limits described in Margaret B. Blackman, *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, a Haida Woman* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982; Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1982).
8. *Guide to the Nez Perce National Park* (Washington: National Park Service, 1983); Ella Clark, *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), 20–23.
9. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 50.

10. Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807–1846* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 124.
11. Vibert, *Traders' Tales*, 132.
12. Vibert, *Traders' Tales*, 50–58.
13. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670–1870* (Winnipeg, MB: Watson & Dwyer Publishing; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); Alexandra Harmon, *Indians in the Making: Ethnic Identities and Indian Identities Around Puget Sound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 16–17.
14. Sylvia Van Kirk, “From ‘Marrying-In’ to ‘Marrying-Out’: Changing Patterns of Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Marriage in Colonial Canada,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23, no. 3 (2002): 1–11.
15. Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985).
16. McLoughlin to the HBC Governor and Committee, November 15, 1843, quoted in Dorothy Nafus Morrison, *Outpost: John McLoughlin and the Far Northwest* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1999), 174.
17. James R. Gibson, *Farming the Frontier: The Agricultural Opening of the Oregon Country, 1786–1846* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), 31–43; John A. Hussey, “The Women of Fort Vancouver,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 92, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 292–93.
18. Vibert says that in 1835 “there were 218 Canadians, 138 Scots and other Europeans, 55 Hawai’ians, and 47 Métis and eastern Native men on servant contracts in the Columbia and New Caledonia districts,” Vibert, *Trader’s Tales*, 41.
19. Hussey, “The Women of Fort Vancouver”; Vibert, quoting American visitor Thomas Farnham in 1839, Vibert, *Trader’s Tales*, 112; Morrison, *Outpost*, 148.
20. Sylvia Van Kirk, “A Transborder Family in the Pacific North West: Reflecting on Race and Gender in Women’s History,” this volume.
21. Carlos Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 80–84; Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Converting the West: A Biography of Narcissa Whitman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
22. Morrison, *Outpost*, 380–82.
23. Of the hundreds of volumes devoted to the Overland Trails, the most comprehensive and balanced is generally agreed to be John Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); the pathbreaking study of gender roles on the trail is that of John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979). The fullest exploration of the meaning of women’s diaries is Lillian Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).
24. Contemporary accounts and letters were often candid about these conditions, but by the time histories of Oregon were written, the hardships had apparently receded from memory and a much more upbeat tone prevailed in works like H.H. Bancroft, *History of Oregon* (San Francisco: History Company, 1886), which was written by Frances Fuller Victor.
25. John Rember, *Traplins* (New York: Pantheon, 2003).
26. See Unruh and Faragher on the unfamiliarity with Indians.

27. Malcolm Clark Jr., *Eden Seekers: The Settlement of Oregon, 1818–1862* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 214.
28. Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 58; Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest*, 116–20.
29. Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 154–57.
30. Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 154.
31. Peter Boag, *Environment and Experience: Settlement Culture in Nineteenth-Century Oregon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 73.
32. Boag, *Environment and Experience*, 139.
33. Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest*, 97.
34. See Schlissel, *Women's Diaries*.
35. William A. Bowen, *The Willamette Valley: Migration and Settlement on the Oregon Frontier* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 51–53.
36. This was standard practice, learned on earlier frontiers. See, for example, John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 144–45.
37. Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest*, 103. However, Dorothy O. Johansen and Charles M. Gates point out that the 7,500 is a surprisingly small proportion of the nearly 30,000 people who came to Oregon before 1855. *Empire of the Columbia: A History of the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 231–34.
38. Bowen says that, overall, there were 154.2 males per 100 females; but that the gender balance was closer—58 per cent male to 42 per cent female—in rural areas. Bowen, *The Willamette Valley*, 53–55.
39. Alexandra Harmon demonstrates this reality for Puget Sound.
40. Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).
41. See Barman, *The West Beyond the West*.
42. Ann Laura Stoler, “Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule,” *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History* 31, no. 1 (1989): 148.
43. Daniel P. Marshall, “American Miner-Soldiers at War with the Nlaka’pamux of the Canadian West,” in *Parallel Destinies*, ed. Findlay and Coates, 31–79.
44. Marshall, “American Miner-Soldiers,” 65.
45. Recently, the complexity of the California Gold Rush has been explored by Susan Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000); and the authors in Kenneth Owens, ed., *Riches for All: The California Gold Rush and the World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002). The staid aftermath has been described by Ralph Mann, *After the Gold Rush: Society in Grass Valley and Nevada City, California, 1849–1870* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982).
46. Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 20–47.
47. Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 52–71; Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 10.
48. Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 97–123.
49. Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 111.

50. John Lutz, "Work, Sex and Death on the Great Thoroughfare: Annual Migrations of Canadian Indians to the American Pacific Northwest," in *Parallel Destinies*, ed. Findlay and Coates, 80–103.
51. Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 138–66; Lenna Deutsch, *The Mercer's Belles* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1992).
52. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (London: Routledge, 1996), 24–25, quoted in Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 175.
53. Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 129–50.
54. Ethel Wilson, *Swamp Angel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954); Desmond Pacey, *Ethel Wilson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967).
55. Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 7.

