

1997

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Recommended Citation

Sluyter, Andrew, "On “Buried Epistemologies: The Politics of Nature in (Post) colonial British Columbia”: On Excavating and Burying Epistemologies" (1997). *Faculty Publications*. 59.

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Commentary

On “Buried Epistemologies: The Politics of Nature in (Post)colonial British Columbia”

On Excavating and Burying Epistemologies

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In “Buried Epistemologies: The Politics of Nature in (Post)colonial British Columbia,” Willems-Braun (*Annals*, AAG 87:3–31) reveals how colonizers defined nature as a category distinct from culture, not through the power of the state per se but through a taken-for-granted process of resource classification evocative of Borges’s “certain Chinese encyclopedia” (Foucault 1973, xv). In doing so, the colonizers created a logic that made the arrogation of natural resources to themselves and the relegation of native peoples to reservations seem quite, well, natural. That colonial categorization tenaciously continues to constrain the thoughts and actions of British Columbians in their struggles over the forests fringing Clayoquot Sound. Logging companies conceptualize nature as a resource to be managed; environmentalists conceptualize nature as a wilderness to be preserved. Neither pole in that struggle seems capable of conceptualizing a relation between nature and native peoples except for such static, romanticized impositions as “traditional.” The colonizers’ categorization of nature as distinct from culture thus continues to deny both the millennia-old cultural landscape the Spaniards and British encountered in the eighteenth century as well as any major role for native peoples in creating future cultural landscapes.

Indeed, growing up on the coast just south of the Alaska Panhandle, I witnessed the persistent landscape manifestations of such colonial thinking—vestiges sketching a spatial genealogy of power. With the Indian Village on the reservation facing the company town across the chuck, the continuity of state power plainly stuck out. Rec-

ognition of the continuity of a subtler kind of power, the power of the taken-for-granted categories that concerns Willems-Braun, remained more in the gut than the head. Hints hid amid the tumble-down log buildings of a farm along the river, “carved out of the wilderness,” so the story went, “by a pioneer family taking a chance on the frontier of civilization.” Juxtaposed, just upstream a reach, the landscape contradicted the category termed wilderness: the salmon-berries choked the bank and concealed the silvered planks of the Old Indian Village, but you could still make out the carved figures, as beautiful and skillful as any painting of the colonizers’ civilization. The topographic maps also echoed the contradictory categories of colonizer and colonized. Many of the rivers and mountains bore the names of geologists who had surveyed the wilderness for the resources that were to sustain civilization; others bore the names of the resources themselves: Gold Creek, Copper Mountain. Again juxtaposed, other toponyms contradicted those elemental categories with evidence of a landscape long occupied, classified, and named according to a different logic.

Yet in his avid digging up of the colonizers’ taken-for-granted epistemologies, Willems-Braun indiscriminately buries other epistemologies. In concert with many smitten by the uptown cooliality of postmodernism, he negates the work of other geographers who have striven to understand the ways in which colonizers rhetorically and materially invented colonized peoples and natures. “Geographers,” claims Willems-Braun, “have had little to say about the role that the production of nature (rhetorically and materially)

has played in the colonization of particular social environments, how natural scientists (including geographers) made visible and available to colonial administration a discrete realm called 'nature' that could be seen as separate from colonized peoples, or, perhaps more important, how what counts as 'nature' *today* is often constituted within, and informed by, the legacies of colonialism (p. 5; italics in original).

The dynamic West Coast tradition—the Sauerian tradition (Zimmerer 1996)—stands in opposition to that assertion. Sauer made the point early: "The two most important things to know about Mexico still are the patterns of life that existed before the coming of the white men and the changes that were introduced during the first generation or two of the Spanish period" (Sauer 1941). Significantly, Sauer's concerns regarding colonization extended beyond the institutions of technology and state power that the Spaniards implanted in the Caribbean and that have had such continuing consequences for Latin America more broadly. In *The Early Spanish Main* (1966), he catches the Spaniards in acts of defining and categorizing Caribbean peoples and environments—from initial hesitance and idiosyncrasy to the hegemony and finality of codification. "Loot" became the rubric inscribed over the lands, "puerile labor" over the peoples. Those categories intersected in the destructive logic that consumed thousands of native lives in the gold placers. In divorcing culture and nature, the Spaniards materially and rhetorically erased the cultural landscape, created a naturalized landscape of reforested native fields, and squandered generations of ecological knowledge.

In a benchmark iteration of that same tradition, Hecht and Cockburn (1989) spin a similar tale about the Amazon, one which connects Sauer's research on the origins of the colonial project to the present struggle over the rainforest. In *The Fate of the Forest*, Hecht and Cockburn draw on the efforts of several generations of geographers and their allies in anthropology and biology. That research has challenged the persistent categorizations of nature as separate from native peoples: of forest as undeveloped resource, of forest as pristine ecosystem, and of forest as Edenic stasis with equally static noble savages. As Hecht and Cockburn tell the story, the dwellers in the forest and the forest share an intertwined history of varied and dynamic practices and epistemologies.

In fact, if anything, the Sauerian tradition has been preoccupied with dispelling the representation of the Americas as a primordial wilderness but sparsely inhabited by native peoples. While George Catlin, who partook in forging the colonizers' axiomatic images of native peoples, conjectured sixteen million as the contact-period population of North America, that figure had come to seem unreasonably high to most scholars of the first half of this century—high even for North, Middle, and South America combined (Catlin 1973 [1844], vol. 1:6). In the midst of the Depression, with a controversially high estimate of half a million for northwestern Mexico alone, Sauer (1935) initiated a continuing tradition of scholarship that now places the 1492 hemispheric population at some fifty million (Denevan 1992a). Neither a Lost Tribe of Israel nor Nabataens had built the pyramids among the savages of the American wilderness, as had seemed axiomatic for so long. The architectural vestiges, the less discernible agricultural vestiges, and the vegetation itself confirmed that the landscapes of the Americas before Europe comprised long and densely inhabited, profoundly cultural landscapes (Denevan 1992b).

Willems-Braun (27n) does cite *The Fate of the Forest*, albeit tangentially and in a footnote, yet seems to have missed the point of the book as thoroughly as of the tradition: Hecht and Cockburn wrote to make a difference—and they have. All manner of folks assimilated the story they told about the Amazon and came to recognize the "buried epistemologies" rooted in the first several generations of colonization, habits of thought that continue to grip political struggles and silence alternative categories. While reconstructions of the material and conceptual complexities of landscape changes always remain biased and partial projects, they can reveal some of the squandered potentials, the taken-for-granted categories, and the possibilities for the emergence of alternatives (Sluyter 1996). As surely as academic discourse inescapably draws on and recreates social power, the stories of those landscapes become political acts. The measure of the political relevance of any particular story, however, is the breadth of its swath through the spectrum of the political community. To become broadly believed, assimilated, and reproduced storytellers employ a lingua franca that includes rather than excludes—or they risk ending up in the dustbin of turgidity (Cronon 1994).

In the end, Willems-Braun's piece stimulated a deeper understanding of my childhood landscapes and the politics of British Columbia. His work displays much continuity of spirit, insight, and purpose with the dynamic trajectory of the Sauerian tradition. And he will gain greater salience by acknowledging, appreciating, critiquing, and informing that tradition. The postcolonial genre potentially offers more than introversion multiplied by neology and raised to the power of vogue, but the propensity of some geographers to ignore their own intellectual roots—some of the leading critical thinkers of their times, from Kropotkin to Sauer—does little to realize that potential. That Sauer's "white men" should sound so profoundly wrong only fifty years after he wrote "The Personality of Mexico" clearly indicates that rhetorical axioms grip all of us but, also, can change. That his insights on the cultural condition of precolonial landscapes and on the persistent legacy of colonialism in naturalizing those landscapes should still sound so profoundly right—in fact, on the basis of much subsequent research, even more right—clearly indicates that geographers have had much to say about "the role that the production of nature (rhetorically and materially) has played in the colonization of particular social environments" (p. 5)—and continues to.

Derek Gregory provides a hopeful, if somewhat equivocal, intermezzo: "I also suspect that the reawakening of an interest in cultural ecology and environmental history may presage a return to some of Sauer's most pressing concerns (though one that is likely to be informed by more recent adventures in cultural theory and cultural politics)" (Gregory 1994:133).

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