Silenced Stories: First Nations Presence and Erasure in the Cariboo Gold Rush

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In 1862, a succession of gold strikes along the banks of Antler, Lightning, and Williams

Creek resulted in the Cariboo gold rush – an event which cemented the town of Barkverville in the historical narrative. It included an influx of over 10,000 European miners, with the construction of the Cariboo Wagon Road cutting through Tsilhqot'in and Dakelh territories, in spite of strong resistance. Historian Robin Fisher notes that the gold rush was the singular catalyst by which First Nations people were removed of their agency, as "cultural change was directed from the outside," as the settlement influx that accompanied British Columbia's gold rushes "intended fundamental change." Although First Nations' peoples were active participants in many aspects of Gold Rush life, the history of the Cariboo gold rush has been a narrative largely – if not completely – told from a colonized perspective. As Adele Perry

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¹ Mica Jorgenson, ""It Happened to Me in Barkerville": Aboriginal Identity, Economy, and Law in the Cariboo Gold Rush, 1862-1900." (Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 2012), 1.

² Varco, C. M., Browne, A.J., & Einboden, R. (2014). *Prince George: Sociohistorical, geographical, political and economic context profile*. EQUIP Healthcare: Research to equip primary healthcare for equity, in partnership with Central Interior Native Health Society. University of British Columbia, Vancouver & Prince George, BC, 5. This is the monograph's requested citation.

³ Robin Fisher, Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890. (Vancouver, CA: UBC Press, 1992), 130. Fisher's monograph, while an indispensable resource, primarily focuses the First Nations' relationship to the gold rush in the context of the violence that accompanied the Fraser River Canyon in 1858, and the subsequent removal of Indigenous cultural autonomy.

⁴ Jorgenson writes: "The only aboriginal account of life in Barkerville is a narrative found inscribed on the wall of the Richfield Jail in 1885. Signed by two inmates, "John" and "Nuti," the brief lines lament their imprisonment: "Oh! I got real drunk! It happened to me here; it happened to me in Barkerville."" See Mica Jorgenson, It Happened to Me, 3. After contacting the Barkerville Archives and learning that this piece had regrettably been removed from its online database, a diligent search unearthed a photograph of this piece and an excellent explication. It can be found in Ives Goddard and William C. Sturtevant's Handbook of North American Indians: Volume 17; Languages. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 178. Goddard asserts that this jailhouse inscription is one of the earliest written

asserts, "Settler colonies like British Columbia are organized around the double need to dispossess indigenous societies and build a settler population in their stead." It is unfortunate that 20th century scholarship and popular culture has largely made the gold rush synonymous with a white frontier mythos and colonization. Historian Mica Jorgenson has observed that there are almost no examples of documentary evidence created by a First Nations person during the gold rush, and that any gold rush history based on primary documents is by necessity a history of contact. This paper will examine the ways in which the cultural fabric of 1860s – 1870s Barkerville was influenced by a varied scope of First Nations presences and experiences, while those experiences were simultaneously erased and made the 'Other' – both during the Gold Rush and by the subsequent historical record.

This erasure of experience is reflective of Elizabeth Furniss's postulation that a powerful frontier mythos has permeated British Columbian culture. This mythos involves the marginalization and erasure of Aboriginal people from the historical narrative. Neither Richard Wright's Barkerville: Williams Creek, Cariboo nor Bruce Ramsey's Barkerville: A Guide to the

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pieces of the Carrier language, and one of the only pieces of primary evidence from the gold rush that is exclusively told from a First Nations perspective.

⁵ Adele Perry, *Edge of Empire*, 19.

⁶ A significant deviation from this trend is Steve Hunter's fictitious *The Cameron Ridge Conspiracy*, an account of the gold rush told from a Dakelh perspective. Although the discerning reader must be wary of cultural appropriation and a colonized bias to the text, the novel has heralded acclaim from the Southern Carrier community. Sage Birchwater, 2013. "The cameron ridge conspiracy an intriguing read." *The Tribune* [William's Lake, B.C], July 25,

http://ezproxy.viu.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.viu.ca/docview/1412548752?accountid=12246. Accessed October 12, 2016.

⁷ Mica Jorgenson, It Happened To Me, 9.

⁸ Elizabeth Furniss, *The Burden of History : Colonialism and the Frontier Myth in a Rural Canadian Community.* (Vancouver, CA: UBC Press, 2007), 53.

⁹ Furniss, Burden of History, 53.

Fabulous Cariboo Gold Camp make any mention of First Nations people. ¹⁰ Early studies of Barkerville's history such as Isabel Bescoby's 1933 article "Society in Cariboo during the Gold Rush" are entirely absent of mentioning the First Nations' presence in the Cariboo. ¹¹ Other scholarship on the gold rush, particularly that which is marketed toward popular culture, has portrayed the local First Nations people as exclusively aggressive or primitive, with no indication given to their livelihoods or activities at the time of the gold rush. ¹² In spite of this erasure of an Indigenous presence during the gold rush, primary evidence – which this paper shall examine – indicates that "aboriginal people were a part of Barkerville's past and, at the same time, that Barkerville was a part of aboriginal history. The sources from this area tell a complex story of negotiation, adaptation, and occasional conflict in British Columbia." ¹³

The area of British Columbia that would later become synonymous with Barkerville and the Cariboo gold rush is identified as the traditional land of the Dakelh (Carrier) First Nation.¹⁴

The Dakelh have occupied the interior of British Columbia in excess of 10,000 years, carry richly diverse cultures and languages, and had a nomadic, seasonal presence throughout the Bowron

¹⁰ See Bruce Ramsey, Barkerville: A Guide to the Fabulous Cariboo Gold Camp, (Langley, B.C.: Sunfire Publications, 1987). Another example of this erasure is Richard Wright, Barkerville, Williams Creek, Cariboo, (Duncan, B.C.: Winter Quarters Press, 1993).

¹¹ Isabel Bescoby, "Society in Cariboo during the Gold Rush" The Washington Historical Quarterly 24, no. 3 (1933): 195-207. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.viu.ca/stable/40475520 (Accessed October 10, 2016).

¹² See Art Downs, Cariboo Gold Rush: The Stampede That Made BC, (Surrey, B.C.: Heritage House Publishing, 1987).

¹³ Jorgenson, It Happened To Me, 3.

¹⁴ Mica Jorgenson, "INTO THAT COUNTRY TO WORK": Aboriginal economic activities during barkerville's gold rush. BC Studies, (185), 109-113,115-136,240 (2015). Retrieved from http://ezproxy.viu.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.viu.ca/docview/1682229477?accountid=12246. Accessed 9 October, 2016. In the Proquest database, this article is only viewable as a fluid document, without page numbers.

Lake / modern Barkerville area.¹⁵ The earliest post contact documentation of Dakelh occupation can be attributed to Simon Fraser during his 1808 expedition. Fraser mentioned "several houses of the Nasquitins" at the mouth of the Cottonwood River and the Quesnel River, both of which emerge from the Cariboo Mountains.¹⁶ Returning through the area, Fraser's men "procured some furs, plenty of fish and berries."¹⁷

Unfortunately, the Dakelh people experienced a massive depopulation from smallpox between 1848-1850, and again in 1862. Historian Cole Harris advances that part of the Dakelh's pattern of erasure from Barkerville's history lies in the fact that this mass depopulation meant that relatively few Indigenous people worked in their traditional area, as survivors shifted and amalgamated toward more central and favorable conditions. Harris further asserts that the Cariboo was largely absent of First Nations people, who were relocating throughout Western Canada to take advantage of the fur trade. John Lutz counters Harris's hypothesis when he asserts that "At the same time, rising employment opportunities associated with the gold rush attracted Aboriginal people in Barkerville from other areas of the province that were undergoing similar demographic changes."

In spite of their relatively few numbers, and their erasure from the historical record,

First Nations people were an active and integral part of Barkerville's cultural fabric. Drawn by

¹⁵ Varcoe et al., *Prince George*, 7.

¹⁶ Simon Fraser and Lamb, W. Kaye, *The Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser, 1806-1808*, Vol. 6. (Toronto, CA: Dundurn Press, 2007), 84.

¹⁷ Fraser and Lamb, *Letters and Journals*, 148.

¹⁸ Cole Harris, "Social Power and Cultural Change in Pre-Colonial British Columbia," *BC Studies* (1997-1998): 53.,

¹⁹ Harris, *Social Power*, 53.

²⁰ Harris, *Social Power*, 79.

²¹ John Sutton Lutz, *Makúk : A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver, CA: UBC Press, 2008), 177.

the prospect of new economic pursuits and the aforementioned central location, First Nations from around British Columbia poured through the Cariboo. These groups included Indigenous people from the St'at'imc, Tsilhqot'in, Haida, and Coast Salish First Nations. ²² Jorgenson notes that "they hunted, fished, gathered, farmed, raised their children, and exchanged their labour in different combinations, as opportunities presented themselves." Although few primary sources give suggestion as to First Nations labour and livelihood, Indigenous people continued to fish in abundance throughout the short-lived gold rush. The *Cariboo Sentinel* notes: "The Indians along [the Bowron river] are having a joyful time in catching and drying salmon. The run of good, well-conditioned fish is enormous; from the piles that are hung up to dry at the numerous fishing stations on both sides of the river, it is evident that the Indians have been ad are yet extremely diligent in catching and preserving all they can."²⁴

In spite of this presence, First Nations people were physically separated from the larger community in encampments on the edge of Barkerville. Figure 1, entitled "Indian Encampment, Barkerville, Aug. '99" depicts a plethora of cabins on the north end of the city. Furthermore, packhorses, a covered wagon, sheds, carts, and shelters are depicted in the photograph. ²⁵ This

http://collections.barkerville.ca/gallery/P1/P1479.jpg/view (accessed 10 October, 2016).

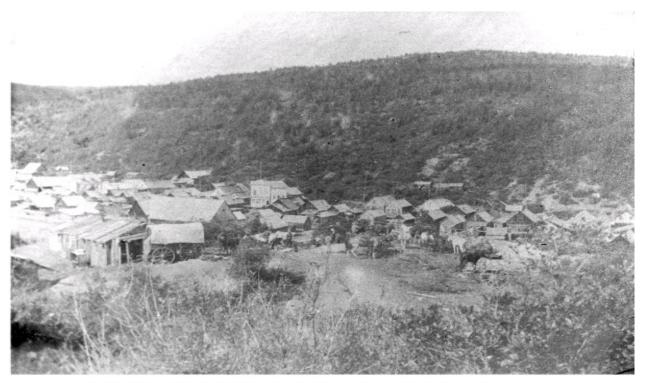
²² Jorgenson, Into That Country.

²³ Jorgenson, Into That Country.

²⁴ "The Salmon Run." The Cariboo Sentinel, August 14, 1869. Accessed October 7, 2016. http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0170297. Unfortunately, this newspaper account does not specify if these fishers are Dakelh or immigrated Aboriginal people. This is one account of several within The Cariboo Sentinel of First Nations' fishing activities along the Bowron River.

²⁵ Photograph, "Indian Encampment, Barkerville, Aug. '99." Barkerville Historic Town Library and Archives, c1899. From *Pritchard Album P-1479A*.

imbalance is further evidence to support Herbert's thesis, indicating that indigenous people were socially and physically segregated from the rest of Barkerville Society.²⁶



P-1479A Barkerville Photograph Collection Acc. #1966.68.1.027 (Pritchard album)

View of Barkerville
Inscription below: Indian encampment, Barkerville, Aug. '99 [1899]

Figure 1

Although First Nations people were separated as the 'Other', they continued to be interwoven as an important part of public life. This juxtaposition is perhaps best evidenced in Barkerville's Dominion Day celebrations. Although Indigenous peoples were invited to participate, Aboriginals were relegated to particular events and festivities, and were forbidden

²⁶ Christopher Herbert, "Unequal Participants: Race and Space in the Interracial Interactions of the Cariboo Gold Fields, 1860-1871," (Master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2005): 66.

from drinking liquor.²⁷ The local newspaper claimed that "Indians" gathered in Barkerville "from all parts of the province to witness the [Dominion Day] amusements."²⁸ As an example of the ways these events were segregated, The *Cariboo Sentinel* lists separate competitions exclusive to 'Indians': a 200 yard handicap race, a wheelbarrow race, sack race, 'Indian' children's race, and a separate competition for 'Siwash' horses.²⁹

What few references to Indigenous people exist in the historical record are described with an air of public spectacle. For example, The *Cariboo Sentinel* reports that "About forty Indians from about Stewart's lake arrived in Quesnelmouth last Saturday. They came under the direction of Mr. Ogden, of the Hudson Bay Company, to carry goods and provisions to Fort Ogden. The uncouth appearance and manner of the savages attracted much attention and considerable amusement." The connection between spectacle and First Nations presence can be further evidenced in the murder of First Nations prostitute Lucy Bones, who was found dead in her cabin outside of Barkerville. In a surprising turn from its usual erasure of First Nations presence, *The Cariboo Sentinel* devoted half a page to graphically describing Bones' occupation, grisly murder, and white male companions. Due to the presence of alcohol, Barkerville's local coroner ruled the murder of an Aboriginal as "death caused by intemperance."

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²⁷ Herbert, *Unequal Participants*, 71.

²⁸ "Dominion Day." *The Cariboo Sentinel*, July 11 1874. Accessed October 10, 2016. http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0170632.

²⁹ "Dominion Day." *The Cariboo Sentinel*, July 11 1874. Accessed October 10, 2016. http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0170632.

³⁰ "Stewart's Lake Indians." *The Cariboo Sentinel*, August 14, 1869. Accessed October 10, 2016. http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0170297.

³¹ "Sudden Death and Inquest." *The Cariboo Sentinel,* August 15 1874. Accessed October 9, 2016. http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0170288.

Herbert asserts that prostitution "created a space for Native women in the gold field towns that the town elites saw as antithetical to their idealized space." Indeed, the historical evidence supports such a statement. A 1869 article by the *Cariboo Sentinel* titled "Profits for Agriculture," juxtaposed the mighty colonization of the frontier with "your ignorant, slothful, unpolished subject who digs about a few acres, hunts and goes fishing, and then after having done just sufficient to satisfy the typical wolf at the door, sits down in front of his log shanty and smokes his dodder with his aboriginal companion of the softer sex." This evidence synthesizes well with Adele Perry's claim that "Notions and practices of manhood and womanhood were central to the twinned businesses of marginalizing Aboriginal people and designing and building a white society." According to Perry, "the many and varied efforts to transform British Columbia from a First Nations territory to a white settler colony do not suggest imperial triumph as much as they hint at imperial vulnerability," and postulates that the vulnerable empire imported large numbers of white women to stilt settler-Indigenous intermarriage, perpetuating the white frontier image.

Jorgenson has noted that First Nations people are almost entirely absent from sources such as the *Cariboo Sentinel*, except in discourse as it relates to slovenliness and public spectacle, and in discussions of crime. ³⁶ According to Herbert, Aboriginal people were considered the improper inhabitants of the community, and therefore came to be equated with

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³² Herbert, *Unequal Participants*, 70.

³³ "Profits For Agriculture." *The Cariboo Sentinel*, July 24 1869. Accessed October 11, 2016. http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0170823.

³⁴ Perry, *Edge of Empire*, 19.

³⁵ Perry, *Edge of Empire*, 195.

³⁶ Jorgenson, *It Happened To Me*, 48.

criminality.³⁷ Jorgenson asserts that "since the economy and the courts were the primary forums for aboriginal peoples' interactions with newcomers, these are the locales where the documentation is disproportionately weighted."³⁸ A myriad of evidence can support this statement. The *Cariboo Sentinel* reported on the assault of native woman "Full Moon" in 1871, in which "Two Indians – a Lillooet and a Hydah", also referred to as "Siwash", were implicated and faced prison time.³⁹ First Nations men not integrated with colonial law were identified as "miscreant".⁴⁰ The *Cariboo Sentinel* proved to have an air for sensationalism when, during the murder trial of First Nations man James Barry, the paper was corrected by the local reverend for making untrue statements about the accused.⁴¹

This research paper has examined the ways in which Indigenous presence and activity has been erased from historiography and popular culture in favour of the colonized "frontier myth". ⁴² Herbert synthesizes these findings nicely when he asserts that "The Native presence in the towns posed a challenge to White conceptions of space. To Whites, Natives properly belonged in the hinterland and constituted a threat to the social order... In response, the elites tended to simply deny the Native presence... Indeed, Whites tended to remark on Natives in

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are identified as Aboriginals who were not local to the area, and that a significant number of Aboriginal migrants were active in Barkerville. Full Moon also provided testimony in Chinook, - evidence that the language was still very much an aspect of public life in 1871.

³⁷ Herbert, *Unequal Participants*, 68.

³⁸ Jorgenson, *It Happened To Me*, 17.

³⁹ "Full Moon." *The Cariboo Sentinel*, July 22 1871. Accessed October 11, 2016. http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0170770. This particular news article is also significant in that the two men

⁴⁰"Still at Large." *The Cariboo Sentinel,* October 11 1866. Accessed October 12, 2016. http://dx.doi.org/1014288/1.0171274.

⁴¹"Untitled." *The Cariboo Sentinel*, July 15 1867. Accessed October 9, 2016. http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0170687.

⁴² Furniss, *Burden of History*, 53.

the town only when they acted in a 'criminal' or 'anti-social' manner."⁴³ Jorgenson corroborates and extends this hypothesis when she writes, "... the Cariboo gold rush was the extension of a broader global process of developmental and demographic change."⁴⁴ It is only through a small selection of primary sources – and newly burgeoning postcolonial historiography – that we can assess that First Nations people were more central to the cultural fabric of gold rush life than colonizers' accounts and the past century of historiography has led us to believe. First Nations oral histories have proven difficult to track due to unusual immigration and emigration patterns in the Cariboo, and well over a century of systematic erasure. As Perry postulates:

"Our years on the edge of empire were dominated by a protracted and many-pronged effort to reconstruct British Columbia as a white society... Dispossession and settlement were not discrete processes: they were mutually dependent and deeply intertwined. Marginalizing First Nations and fostering white society were two sides of one colonial coin..."

The solution Perry offers is to "suggest the necessity of rethinking our fraught relationship to race and place." It will only be through the uncovering of additional primary sources, a re-establishing of First Nations oral histories and Dakelh culture, and a continuously improved historiographical model that we will come to a better understating of the history of First Nations people during the Cariboo gold rush. Indeed, understanding the First Nations' interpretation of the gold rush will not only provide us with an Aboriginal history of the post

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⁴³ Herbert, *Unequal Participants*, 67-68. Herbert also concludes that power dynamics outside of municipalities were more balanced than central locations – such as Barkerville – where immigrants asserted a higher cultural dominance (7).

⁴⁴ Jorgenson, It Happened To Me, 31.

⁴⁵ Perry, *Edge of Empire*, 194.

⁴⁶ Perry, *Edge of Empire*, 194.

1862 Cariboo, but can add to our understanding of 19th century British Columbia's historiography as a whole.

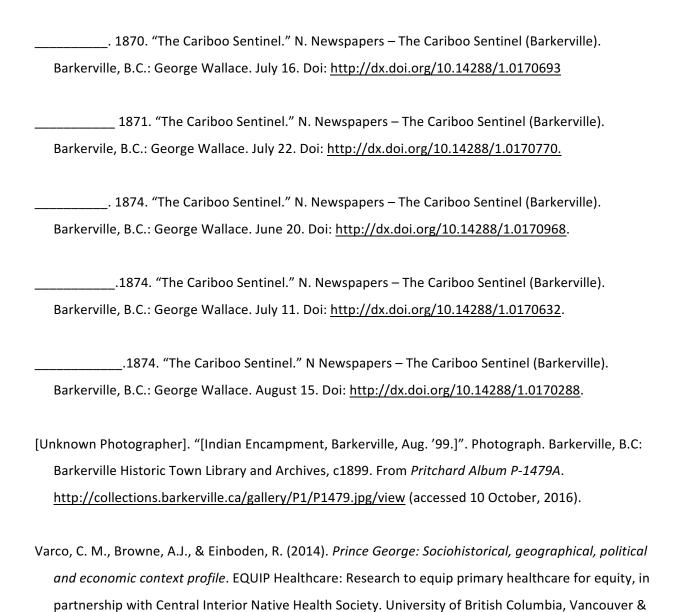
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